

**NIOBA CHRISTIANA?
CARMEN DE MARTYRIO MACCHABAEORUM OF LATE
ANTIQUITY AND THE OVIDIAN STORY OF NIOBE¹**

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The fate of the poem *Carmen de martyrio Macchabaeorum* (“On the Martyrdom of the Maccabees”, 394 verses)² in the history of Latin literature is in many ways typical of a strain of Late Antiquity minor epic poetry on Biblical themes, termed by Reinhart Herzog as “non-canonic Pseudepigrapha” (“außerkanonische Pseudepigrapha”)³. The poem was created between the late 4th century and 6th century, probably in Southern Gaul, or in Northern Italy⁴ – the oldest surviving manuscript dates to the late 6th century from the latter region (however, it is an exception with Roman poetry for such an early manuscript to survive).⁵ Four other surviving manuscripts written between the late 8th and 10th (or 11th) centuries attest to the popularity of *Carmen* in the early Middle Ages.⁶ The oldest of these – dating to the pre-Carolingian period – features the poem without citation of authorship, and with others it is attributed to Hilary (probably of Poitiers); this attribution is nevertheless mistaken, a fact indicated not only by the differences between *Carmen* and the oeuvre of the said hymnographer, but also by its parallel with similar Biblical poems dating to Late Antiquity, which were in the period of the Carolingian Renaissance likewise attributed to various notable figures of the patristic tradition (most often Tertullian, Cyprian, or again Hilary). Although some of the most interesting hypotheses regarding its authorship have been ventured recently,⁷ at this point the poem is still considered anonymous.

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² Since the attribution of the poem to any of the known Hilarys is regarded as mistaken (see below) we continue to refer to it further simply by the abbreviation *Carmen* (not Ps. Hil. *Macc.*, as suggested by *ThLL*).

³ Herzog (1975: XXV–XXVII).

⁴ Weidmann (1995: 30–31). Pavlovskis-Petit (2005: 225) dates the poem without further explanation to the 4th century, Pizzolato – Somenzi (2005: 171) to the 5th century.

⁵ Milano, Bibl. Ambros. C 105 inf., s. VI/VII, 1^{v1}–1^{v1}. On the manuscript see Herzog (1975: XXVIII, note 78) and Weidmann (1995: 100).

⁶ Peiper (1891: XVII, XX–XXII) and Weidmann (1995: 100–102). – The manuscripts of *Carmen* survive either independently, or as part of “poetische Miszellenhandschriften” – miscellanea (Herzog 1975: XXIX). The reason why it was never incorporated in the Carolingian “prosaic or metric Bibles” like other epics from this group is probably due to the fact that it had never been clearly established whether its main source materials (*Mcc II* and *IV*) actually form part of the Biblical Canon.

⁷ Valerian of Cimiez (Weidmann 1995: 29–30), Cyprianus Gallus (Pizzolato – Somenzi 2005: 178–179) – see below, note 70.

The “second life” of *Carmen* as a subject of scholarly research is also typical of non-canonical Biblical poems of late Antiquity.⁸ From the period of Humanism to late-19th century Positivism, *Carmen* attracted only sporadic interest on the part of historians or editors, culminating in the Peiper edition of 1891.⁹ Romantic-influenced literary history primarily viewed the poem as a laboured, rhetorically verbose and dull endeavour by some anonymous Christian versifier; the outlines of literary history have mentioned it either marginally or not at all. It was only after the linguistic turn in the 1970s which even in the field of classical philology heralded a new shift of focus towards hitherto neglected works that some authors of specialized monographs on Biblical epic poetry of Late Antiquity began to pay attention to the poem (the first to do so were Kartschoke and Herzog).¹⁰ In the mid-1990s, Weidmann finally brought out his seminal work, which places *Carmen* within a broader historical context and subjects it to the detailed philological analysis that had hitherto been lacking.¹¹ After the turn of the millennia, there began to appear more specialized critical literary studies discussing its various aspects (Pavlovskis-Petit on the reception of Virgil, Pizzolato on some motifs and their function).¹²

Scholarly interest in this minor text does not come as a surprise. By comparison to other Biblical epics of Late Antiquity – particularly the segment which Herzog describes as non-canonical – the present text is most fascinating precisely from the literary point of view, particularly in its original relationship to its literary sources: not only in that it draws on not one but at least two versions of the same theme, but also in the manner in which this is rendered. For it is not merely a paraphrase (which according to the generally received thesis proposed by Roberts forms the central principle of Biblical epic poetry)¹³ or the simple versification of a text in prose, such as one may find for example in the *Hep-tateuchos* of Cyprianus Gallus and also partly in Juvenecus.¹⁴ In contrast, the anonymous author of *Carmen* derives from his sources merely the basic narrative framework while creating all individual details anew.

History of the Subject and Source Texts

A detailed list of Biblical and Patristic as well as poetic source texts which the author of *Carmen* subsequently drew on to a greater or lesser degree has been compiled by Clemens Weidmann.¹⁵ Among the most crucial sources are the panegyric on the Maccabee brothers by Gregory of Nazianzus¹⁶ (*or.* 15, likely in a Latin translation which has not survived), a sermon of Valerian of Cimiez; the poetic sources include – apart from Virgil and Ovid – in particular the tragedies of Seneca, the *Evangeliorum libri quattuor* of

⁸ For a brief survey of scholarship to date and references in bibliography see Weidmann (1995: 1–2).

⁹ Peiper (1891: 240–254).

¹⁰ Kartschoke (1975: 38–39, 105–111), Herzog (1975: XXV *et passim*).

¹¹ Weidmann (1995) – unpublished (print version forthcoming). The dissertation also includes a new critical edition (Weidmann 1995: 106–121), provisionally available online (<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/anon.martyrio.html>, consulted on January 20, 2012).

¹² Pavlovskis-Petit (2005), and independently of her Pizzolato – Somenzi (2005) and Pizzolato (2007).

¹³ Roberts (1985: *passim*, e.g. 219–220).

¹⁴ See for instance Pizzolato – Somenzi (2005: 194) on the author of *Carmen*: “non si è ... appiattito sulla descrittività ornata di un Giovenco”.

¹⁵ Weidmann (1995: 32–39).

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of this speech (in Greek original) see Ziadé (2007).

Juvencus and Prudentius' *Peristephanon*. In terms of the subject matter as such, however, the anonymous author drew on two prose texts – originally Greek – from the area of the Old Testament. The primary basis is the shorter version of the narrative in the *Second Book of Maccabees* (*II Mcc*) probably dating to the end of the 2nd century BC, which in Greco-Latin Antiquity became incorporated into the Biblical canon and which the poet probably had at his disposal in some unspecified Latin translation.¹⁷ The expanded version of the story exists in the non-canonical *Fourth Book of Maccabees* (*IV Mcc*) from the turn of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD; however, the author of *Carmen* almost certainly drew on its Late Antiquity Latin translation, *Passio Machabaeorum* (henceforth referred to as *PM*).¹⁸

The Second Book of Maccabees is a historical text narrating the so-called “Maccabean Revolt”, i.e. the struggle of the Jews against the ruling Seleucid dynasty in the years 175–160 BC. This account of the draconian punishments introduced by Antiochus IV to suppress the practice of Jewish rituals and the observation of religious prescripts includes – among other things – the story of seven brothers whose refusal to subject themselves and partake of forbidden pork meat cost them their lives (*II Mcc* 7: 1–42). Their demise is described in seven episodes of varying length. The second through the sixth (7: 7–19) have a stereotypical structure: a brief reference to their martyrdom gives way to a discourse by the martyr, expressing his moral victory over the King and as such forming the culmination of each section. The first episode, considerably longer than the others (7: 2–6) provides an introduction, presenting a more detailed account of the situation – detailing the King’s inability to achieve anything by means of torture (the eldest brother speaks only briefly, announcing to the King the brothers’ joint decision to observe religious custom) and the reactions of the other brothers and their mother, encouraging one another to persevere.

The seventh episode (7: 20–40) is by far the longest, forming as it does nearly half of the entire narrative. Probably as a device for slowing down the story to heighten the suspense, after the demise of the sixth brother the attention shifts to the mother, who until this point has only been mentioned in passing at the beginning, and exclusively with the phrasing “*fratres / ceteri cum matre*”.¹⁹ However, in this section her valour is extolled (20: *supra modum autem mater mirabilis et bonorum memoria digna*) and her encouragement of her sons is in fact quoted in her first direct speech, which forms a kind of abstract from all of her (unquoted) monologues hitherto – the mother here speaks in the plural although at this point only the youngest of her sons remains alive.²⁰ The moral battle which had until then been carried on between the King and the respective brothers now shifts to a struggle between the King and the mother. The King resorts to a new tactic: he tries to persuade the youngest brother by trying to convince him through promises of good. When the boy refuses to submit, the King admonishes the mother to persuade him

¹⁷ Here quoted below after the Vulgate (Weber 1983³, with added punctuation).

¹⁸ For more details on both source texts see Weidmann (1995: 3–10, 32–33).

¹⁹ *II Mcc* 7: 1 (*fratres cum matre*), 4 (*ceteris eius fratribus cum matre insipientibus*) and 5 (*ceteri una cum matre*).

²⁰ *II Mcc* 7: 22–23: *Nescio qualiter in utero meo apparuistis, neque enim ego spiritum et animam donavi vobis et vitam et singulorum membra non ego ipsa conpegi, sed enim mundi creator, qui formavit hominis nativitatem quique omnium invenit originem, et spiritum vobis iterum cum misericordia reddet et vitam sicut nunc vosmet ipsos despicitis propter leges eius.*

herself – she appears to consent, but in fact in her native language (*patria voce*) employed in her second emotional speech she instead implores the boy to persevere.²¹ The boy responds in a lengthy diatribe (30–38) describing the punishment which will befall the King as well as the eternal salvation awaiting him and his brothers; this is followed by his martyrdom. The conclusion accounts the death of the mother in a single verse, without providing any further detail.²²

The second source, the so-called *Fourth Book of Maccabees*, is not a historical account but rather a moral and philosophical treatise discussing the superiority of reason over passion.²³ Together with the story of the elder Eleazar, likewise taken from *II Mcc*, the fate of the seven martyred brothers is used here as an *exemplum*. To this end, the author of the treatise expands what was originally a rather stark narrative, adding a number of motifs as well as recounting it in far more evolved style. Particularly striking is the *variatio* in the accounts of the execution of each of the brothers, whose detail and climactic structure are reminiscent of the description of the death scenes *gradatim* and *membratim*, for example, in Seneca's tragedies.²⁴ Of significance for the present paper are three changes in particular. Firstly, the author substitutes the introductory mention of flogging with an opening scene in which the King attempts to persuade the young men both by enticement and intimidation (*fallaci oratione aut poenae timore*, 8: 3) to renounce their faith.²⁵ This is related to the second shift – a marked increase of direct speech. The ten monologues of *II Mcc*, the first seven of which are moreover quite brief,²⁶ are replaced here by nineteen oratories: three in the opening scene of persuasion, three in the first episode, one or two in the following episodes, and four in the last one. What is more, the final two speeches – the mother's appeal to the youngest son and his address to the King – are distinctly longer than all of the preceding ones. The moral battle between the tyrant and the martyrs thus shifts towards disputation, acquiring an almost theatrical character.

Thirdly, the most significant change concerns the figure of the mother.²⁷ Her role in the story itself is very similar to that in *II Mcc*: she receives the merest passing mention at the beginning²⁸ speaking only (and in fact here only once) to the youngest son at the King's bidding.²⁹ The following and final section of the text, however, presents a commentary on the story as an example of unwavering firmness in the face of all violence, extolling the martyrs – and here the mother is given equivalent attention to the sons: she

²¹ *II Mcc* 7: 27–29: *Fili mi, miserere mei, quae te in utero decem menses portavi et lac triennio dedi et alui et in aetatem istam perduxī. Peto, nate, aspicias in caelum et terram et ad omnia, quae in eis sunt, et intellegas, quia ex nihilo fecit illa Deus et hominum genus. Ita fit, ut non timeas carnificem istum, sed dignus fratribus tuis effectus suscipe mortem, ut in illa miseratione cum fratribus tuis te recipiam.*

²² *II Mcc* 7: 41: *Novissime autem et mater consummata est.*

²³ See for example *PM* 13: 1: *Numquam magis claruit cogitationem esse dominam passioni.*

²⁴ See for example *Sen. Phoen.* 170–171. – In *Carmen* the motif appears in the second speech of the King: *Membratim perdam septem ... natos* (46).

²⁵ *PM* 8: 4–9: 9. This dialogue probably evolved by expanding the speech of the eldest son in *II Mcc* 7: 2bc: *quid quaeris et quid vis discere a nobis? parati sumus mori magis quam patrias Dei leges praevaricari.*

²⁶ I do not count as a separate speech the brief *non faciam* of the second son in verse 8.

²⁷ On the figure of the mother in both sources as well as the subsequent Greek tradition see Ziadé (2007: 227–257).

²⁸ *PM* 8: 4: *Septem itaque fratres cum matre in senium iam vergente.*

²⁹ *PM* 12: 10–13.

is lauded as a paragon of a wise woman, steadfast in her faith³⁰ and the equal of men,³¹ and her voluntary death in the flames is mentioned³² as well as a citation of her address to her sons after their arrest (which is probably intended to make up in a more organic manner for the speech left out at the beginning of the seventh episode).³³ A major shift by comparison to *II Mcc* is the fact that the mother does not simply accompany her children but instead is explicitly placed on the same level as the sons,³⁴ amplifying the validity of the text as an *exemplum*. These changes as a whole therefore aptly reflect the new function with which the author of *IV Mcc* endowed the narrative.

The Poem in Relation to its Source Texts: Shifts in Perspective and Rhetorical Emphasis

The poem takes the above-cited changes one step further. The most distinct feature is its total focus of attention on the mother: the anonymous poet expands the perspective present solely in the interlude before the seventh episode (*II Mcc*) and the subsequent commentary (*IV Mcc*) to the entire narrative. What was originally only a side character, a witness to the martyrdom of her sons, now becomes the protagonist. This shift is signalled already by the first reference to the mother in each of the texts: while the *Books of Maccabees* first mention the sons (in accordance as *septem fratres cum matre*), the poem gives precedence to the mother (*mater natiq̄ue*, v. 2).³⁵ In fact the entire introductory passage is conceived differently, combining elements of both source texts. While *II Mcc* opens with a reference to the arrest and flogging of both sons and mother, and *IV Mcc* begins the account with the above-cited dialogue between the King and the brothers (where the mother is not mentioned at all), in *Carmen* the King addresses the mother forthrightly and directly. The conclusion of the narrative is likewise different: where *II Mcc* only briefly summarizes that the mother died (by execution?) together with her sons, and *IV Mcc* mentions her voluntary death only several chapters later (see above), the anonymous poet on the contrary lets her die a natural death at the height of the dramatic action, departing in “the arms of her close ones” due to exhaustion from the (mainly spiritual) ordeal she has suffered, but nevertheless while rejoicing.³⁶

In terms of the narrative itself, the poem also strongly accentuates the role of the mother in departure from tradition. Here too the story is divided into seven episodes with a relatively stereotypical structure. Similar to *IV Mcc* the episodes are framed between two direct speeches, but both are nonetheless delivered by the mother: the first at the opening beseeching her son to persevere; the second (as a rule shorter) at the conclu-

³⁰ See for example *PM* 15: 21: *O sapientissima feminarum, amantissima gentis et legis, Noe archae similima in mediis fluctibus et procellis.*

³¹ See for example *PM* 16: 1: *Ecce quantum utilis cogitatio potest, quae non inferiores viris feminas facit.*

³² *PM* 17: 1: *... praecipitem se iecit in flammam, quippe quae non cupiditate vivendi protraxerat tempus, sed causa filiorum.*

³³ *PM* 16: 8–14. – For her other prosopopoeia, a sort of short monologue before her death (which is nevertheless inconsistent with the account of her death in 17: 1), see 18: 7–8.

³⁴ See for example *PM* 15: 6–8: *Vos ergo ... matri in omnibus pares dicam; in nullo enim postponendi feminae venerabili estis, nisi quod illa immanitatem dolorum et oculis exceptit et membris.*

³⁵ See also the similar phrasing in the last verse (394): *sic ipsa et nati sanctorum in parte recepta est.*

³⁶ See verses 390–393: *solverunt gaudia matrem: / iamque ut erat lassata malis, iam voce negata / spirat ovans interque manus conlapsa suorum / concidit exanimis resolutaque membra quierunt.*

sion as a response to his victory – either as thanksgiving to the son or to God, or as proud words addressed to the King.³⁷ The King’s discourse is also cited three times in direct speech – twice at the beginning, in the opening dialogue with the mother, and once in the fifth episode, in the structure of which it replaces the mother’s opening speech. The poem thus features a total of seventeen speeches, fourteen of these delivered by the mother and three by the King, while the sons remain silent throughout.³⁸ Moreover, similar to the *PM*, here the speeches also become longer towards the end of the poem – the last episode (299–389) consists almost entirely of the mother’s two-part address to God (302–344) and to her youngest son (345–379). The entire poem thus revolves around the verbal duel between the mother and the King, with the sons (and similarly the King’s subordinates) acting only as stand-ins. The plot itself is pushed to the background: all that is of essence takes place in the words, the actions are merely their consequences and accompaniment.

These substantial changes that affect the structure of the story could be summarized by the notions of *transfocalisation* (Genette’s taxonomy of inter-textual devices uses this term to denote the shift of focus to what was originally a marginal figure)³⁹ and *rhetorization*, or *dramatization*.⁴⁰ This shift (Weidmann: “strukturell wichtige Verschiebung”, Pizzolato: “stilizzazione estrema”)⁴¹ has been explained in various ways. Older tradition ventured a speculation regarding an unknown source in prose form, the basic material of which the author then modified⁴² – as if the poet, albeit the author of a Biblical epic based on paraphrase, could not give his subject an original treatment. Pizzolato does concede to the author an original concept⁴³ corresponding to his ideological and artistic intent. He suggests to use as a key to reading the text its similarities to the characteristic traits of martyrological literature, particularly the tenet of paradox, which he regards as its defining feature: the silence of the brothers being more eloquent than their discourse had been previously; the mother rejoicing at the death of her sons and the anguish expressed at the eventuality that they might reject their martyrdom in order to preserve their lives.⁴⁴ Pavlovskis-Petit believes the main source of the innovative aspects in *Carmen* to be the imitation of Virgil, especially of some characters in the *Aeneid*, which according to her the author resorts to in order to endow his work with a degree of literary quality that he was unable to achieve on his own.⁴⁵ Weidmann suggests that the work is based on the *topoi* of the heroic mother (*Heldenmutter*) and the opposition of tyrant – woman, which

³⁷ This stereotypical structure receives variation only in Episode 5, where the King speaks at the beginning, and in Episodes 6 and 7, where both of the speeches by the mother in fact follow up, though with a visible juncture. The publisher at CSEL in such cases marks the latter of the speeches with a new set of quotation marks (v. 287, 345).

³⁸ Pizzolato regards the silence of the sons to be the central motif of the whole poem – explaining it as a means of expression stronger than direct speech, thus valorizing the figures of the brothers. See for example Pizzolato – Somenzi (2005: 188): “... il silenzio può essere parola alla massima potenza ... il parlare è sostanzialmente da intendere come espressione che non necessariamente è vera e propria oralità”.

³⁹ Genette (1982: 333–339).

⁴⁰ Pizzolato – Somenzi (2005: 173) propose the term “parafrasi drammatica”.

⁴¹ Weidmann (1995: 40), Pizzolato – Somenzi (2005: 181).

⁴² Weidmann (1995: 41).

⁴³ Pizzolato – Somenzi (2005: 182): “scelta intenzionale di taglio compositivo”.

⁴⁴ Pizzolato – Somenzi (2005: 188–191 *et passim*). On the function of paradox see also Weidmann (1995: 51).

⁴⁵ Pavlovskis-Petit (2005: 242): “for the most part the imitator sounds clumsy and naïve, and the Virgilian borrowings lend him what poetic power he does show.”

the author of *Carmen* may have taken most easily from the tragedies of Seneca (see for instance the dialogue between Ulysses and Andromache in *The Trojan Women*).⁴⁶ I should like to add one more explanation to those cited above, which are more or less convincing – one which has already been ventured in scholarship to date, yet never elaborated upon in greater detail⁴⁷ – namely, the hypothetical inspiration from the story of Niobe in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (*Ov. met.* 6, 146–312).

Parallels Between *mater Macchabaeorum* and Ovid’s Niobe

Parallels between the story of the mother of the Maccabees and Niobe can be found on several levels. In both cases the central theme is one of the confrontation of motherly love with the attitude of the protagonist, which in some way concerns religion and therefore proves to be stronger than motherly love – at least as it is commonly understood. The narrative structure of both stories is also similar, based on a sequence of the executions of seven sons⁴⁸ (with Niobe this sequence is doubled with an additional seven daughters), and the gradual escalation of suspense culminating with the last child, whose death in each case receives especial emphasis in comparison to the rest. The figure of the father is absent from both narratives, whereas the account of the mother’s death concludes the whole plot (this is the case even in *II Mcc.*, where the mother is otherwise entirely marginal and overshadowed by the sons).

The superficial similarity of this episode from Jewish history with one derived from a famous work of poetry, which was perhaps even part of the school curriculum of the era, may have inspired the author of *Carmen* to intentionally accentuate and elaborate upon this in his version. Not only does he place the mother at the centre of the narrative (which is a fundamental change as opposed to both prose sources), but also positively changes the story into a rhetorical duel, where the mother’s courage, manifest in her discourses and interpreted by the King as insulting, is placed in opposition to the King’s efforts to punish her – similar to how Niobe’s blasphemous pride causes offence to Leto,

⁴⁶ Weidmann (1995: 36–37, 41).

⁴⁷ For details regarding the possible allusive connection of the mother of the Maccabees with Niobe as her antithesis as known from the tradition of rhetoric in Greek literature see Ziadé (2007: 243): “La mère de Maccabées, en tant que mère douloureuse, ne pouvait qu’évoquer la Niobé du fond rhétorique commun à l’ensemble de l’Empire : L’orateur, par cette référence implicite au contre-modèle grec de la Mère [...] rompt avec la tradition païenne”.

⁴⁸ This striking seven-part structure was clearly very evident for instance to the scribe of the Carolingian manuscript *P* (Paris, BnF, lat. 2772, s. IX): he highlighted the beginning of the first verse in each episode (by means of an initial of double size); most likely by mistake (since it follows on after the mother’s direct speech) he also highlighted verse 66, and for reasons that remain unclear also verse 327 in the middle of the mother’s speech addressed to the last son (*Qui potis est virga...* – it is possible that he wanted to emphasize the indirect allusion to God, but such an explanation is entirely speculative since in other passages the scribe uses no such device). – The same structure is accentuated in an original way by the scribe of the Carolingian manuscript *B* (Paris, BnF, lat. 8093, s. IX/X): he used capital letters (and a numeral on the margin of the text) to mark the key verses – instead of the first verses of the episode he marked the first verses of the mother’s addresses (57 to the first son, 81 the second son, 162 the fourth son), the verse opening her speech (279 to the sixth son), the verses featuring a numeral (114 the third son: *tertius adtrahitur iuvenis*; 336 the seventh son: *infimus infans*) or the instruction to summon another son (236 to the fifth son: *producite natum*).

who then retaliates by punishing the queen with the loss of her children. The sons, on the other hand, are rendered entirely marginal by the poet, who turns them into the depersonalized object of the mother's resistance and the King's wrath,⁴⁹ as with the Niobids, who are merely innocent targets for the arrows of Apollo and Diana, instruments of an act of revenge carried out against their mother.⁵⁰ In order to accentuate their objectification in this new context, the author stripped the characters of the Maccabee brothers of their direct speeches, unifying the means of their execution – they are all burned at a stake⁵¹ – in contrast to either prose source (the *PM* in particular shows great variety in the description of the death as well as in the direct speeches of each of the sons).⁵² This is nonetheless in keeping with the *Metamorphoses*, where all of Niobe's children die in the same manner, by arrow.

An interpretation of *Carmen* as the narrative of the Maccabees re-styled so as to be reminiscent of Ovid's story of Niobe offers several advantages. It could for instance explain the references to the royal origin of the sons, which does not occur in either of the source texts and which has baffled modern interpreters – the third son, for example, is referred to as *dignus qui regna teneret, dignior Antiocho* (v. 119sq.).⁵³ Neither of the two authors cited thus far as the main sources (i.e. Seneca the Younger and Virgil) moreover play any greater role in the poem. Though the author of *Carmen* most likely knew Seneca (and was perhaps inspired to imitate him by Prudentius), he still directly quotes him only once.⁵⁴ Echoes of Virgil may be relatively frequent, but they are mostly generic in nature, and rather than explaining them as word-for-word inter-textual references to specific passages in Virgil they may perhaps be read as lexical coincidences, as the use of standard set phrases or collocations as a result of those works being presented in schools as stylistic paradigms.⁵⁵

Inspiration from Ovid, on the other hand, is so evident in the entire poem that it can be regarded as one of the most characteristic traits of the authorial style of the anonymous poet.⁵⁶ It is surprising that it has remained unnoticed for so long (both Peiper and

⁴⁹ Pizzolato – Somenzi (2005: 187): “I figli ... espletano la funzione di comprimari della resistenza della madre non quella di testimoni d'una loro autonoma posizione.” See also Weidmann (1995: 68): “Die eigentliche Hauptfigur ist die Mutter, ihre Kinder sind nur stumme Befehlsempfänger, die der Belehrung durch die Mutter bedürfen.”

⁵⁰ Ovid gives each of the sons (fictitious) names, contributing a variety of details to the description of their deaths (including a short direct speech by the youngest son), while the deaths of the nameless daughters are rendered with brevity.

⁵¹ In my opinion one thus cannot speak of “Erfindungsreichtum des nach einer grausamen Strafe sinnenden Tyrannen”, Weidmann (1995: 48).

⁵² For *variatio* in the account of executions in *IV Mcc* 8: 13 and its reception in Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom see Ziadé (2007: 228–229).

⁵³ See for example Pavlovskis-Petit (2005: 233): “Curiously, the assertion that the young man would be worthy to rule makes sense in the Virgilian passage but not in the story of the martyrs, except perhaps figuratively as a reference to the crown of martyrdom; or to suggest that the youth might have made a good king, unlike the cruel Antiochus.” – See also for example verse 287 (*nobilitas*).

⁵⁴ Weidmann (1995: 36): “[...] doch läßt sich außer Sen. Oed. 519 = 227 nirgends sprachlicher Einfluß [...] wahrscheinlich machen.” See the relevant verse in Seneca: *quid arma possint regis irati scies* and *Carmen* 227: *sentiet, irati regis quid tempora possint*.

⁵⁵ For this reason in my opinion most parallels with Virgil cited by Zoja Pavlovskis-Petit (2005) in support of her thesis that *mater Macchabaeorum* is composed after Virgil's Aeneas lack conviction.

⁵⁶ According to Weidmann (1995: 100–102) the imitation of Ovid can also be used in the preparation of the critical edition of the text: “Als wichtiges Kriterium für die Entscheidung zwischen den Überliefer-

Pavlovskis-Petit mention Ovid only marginally, overshadowed by Virgil,⁵⁷ and that its importance was only pointed out by Clemens Weidmann.⁵⁸ Yet the text of the poem is replete with so many obvious quotes, mainly from the *Metamorphoses* but also other Ovid works, that it is barely plausible to explain them as coincidental lexical parallels or subconscious imitation of a text familiar from the school *pensum* (as is often the case with the unintentional Virgilian parallels). It is symptomatic that the correspondences with Ovid's turns of phrase frequently occur at the end of verses. At least ten percent of the verses of *Carmen* end with a collocation that appears to be derived from Ovid – the most striking examples include *est mihi cura meorum* (v. 35),⁵⁹ *non territa mansit* (v. 78),⁶⁰ *turba comitante piorum* (v. 96),⁶¹ *originis auctor* (v. 165),⁶² *in parte moraris* (v. 215)⁶³ and the conclusion of the poem (*sanctorum in parte recepta est* (v. 394).⁶⁴ Less often, the parallels with Ovid occur also at the beginning of verses (e.g. v. 22: *sustulit illa manus*)⁶⁵ or within the verse, both in the same metric position (116: *fortia pectora*,⁶⁶ 219: *viribus utere*⁶⁷), and in a different section of the verse than in Ovid (145: *licet ipse velis*).⁶⁸ Although the text also includes distinct parallels with the work of other poets (apart from Virgil, also Lucan, the Flavian epic poets, Paulinus of Nola⁶⁹ and Cyprianus Gallus)⁷⁰, the echoes of Ovid are nonetheless the most obvious and systematic.

Then there is the issue of style. According to Zoja Pavlovskis-Petit, it “lacks subtlety and is prone to bald repetitiveness”⁷¹; in my view the anonymous poet would appear as a far less pedestrian stylist if we did not measure him up against Virgil (as Pavlovskis-Petit

rungsvarianten sollte neben sprachlichen, stilistischen, metrischen und inhaltlichen Gesichtspunkten auch die Überlieferung von Ovidimitationen gelten, die kaum sekundär von einem Ovidkenner in den Text hineinkonjiziert wurden.”

⁵⁷ Peiper (1891: 298), Pavlovskis-Petit (2005: 228, note 7).

⁵⁸ Weidmann (1995: passim, for example 35): “Ovid [gibt] das wichtigste poetische Vorbild ... ab”.

⁵⁹ See *met.* 12, 594 *si qua est tibi cura tuorum*. See Weidmann (1995: 146).

⁶⁰ See *met.* 15, 514 *mens interrita mansit*. See Weidmann (1995: 166).

⁶¹ See *met.* 6, 594 *turba comitante suarum*. See Weidmann (1995: 174).

⁶² See *Fast.* 2, 399. See Weidmann (1995: 206).

⁶³ See e.g. *met.* 7, 303 *hac in parte moratur*. See Weidmann (1995: 234).

⁶⁴ Cf. *met.* 1, 685 *sopor est oculorum parte receptus*. For the heterotactic occurrence of a similar phrase (in pentameter) see also *epist.* 6, 20 and *remed.* 456. See Weidmann (1995: 324).

⁶⁵ See e.g. *fast.* 3, 363 (*ille*). See Weidmann (1995: 139). – See also for example *Carmen* 40 *miraturque diu* (*am.* 2, 1, 9 *miratusque diu*), see Weidmann (1995: 148); 181 *quid tibi cum ... ?* (several times in Ovid), see Weidmann (1995: 217); 263 *iussa facit* (*fast.* 1, 379 and *met.* 2, 789), see Weidmann (1995: 257).

⁶⁶ See *met.* 11, 462 *ad fortia pectora remos*. See Weidmann (1995: 183).

⁶⁷ See *met.* 8, 110 *v. u. nando* a 10, 658 *v. u. totis*. See Weidmann (1995: 235). – See also *Carmen* 61 *durare diu* (*met.* 15, 259), see Weidmann (1995: 159).

⁶⁸ See *am.* 1, 2, 45 *non possunt, l. i. v., cessare sagittae*. See Weidmann (1995: 197).

⁶⁹ Apart from the passages cited by Weidmann (v. 75, 112, 141, 153, 177, 193 and a number of others) see also for example *Carmen* 84 *reparare salutem* (Paul. Nol. *carm.* 19, 57 – this parallel is among other things also another argument for the reading *reparare* as present in some of the manuscripts; on the textual and critical issues of this verse see Weidmann 1995: 168); 133 *tendebat in altum* (Ps. Paul. Nol. *carm.* 32, 186 *tendit in a.*).

⁷⁰ Parallels with Cyprianus Gallus are relatively frequent and could also be used as an argument in the debate regarding authorship of the poem, see above, note 7. Apart from the passages cited in Weidmann (*Carmen* 3, 122, 236, 343 and many others) we may cite in addition for example 42 *date digna furenti* (see *Cypr. Gall. iud.* 236 *da digna perenni*), 224 *verba profatur* (*num.* 232), 242 *semone locuta est* (*num.* 616), 285 *dicere verbis* (*gen.* 762), 354 *sanctorum in parte manebis* (*num.* 26 *castrorum in parte manentes*).

⁷¹ Pavlovskis-Petit (2005: 226).

does) but rather Ovid, who was obviously the inspiration here in terms of style. For the text displays a number of features typical of Ovid's style,⁷² particularly minor stylistic figures based on word repetition (e.g. anaphora and polyptoton), and intentional repetition of identical or similar verses and turns of phrase in various passages,⁷³ but also antithetic couplets where the contrasting answer-line is underlined by the fact that both verses differ from each other as little as possible.⁷⁴ Parallels with Ovid can also be found in the metric structure (for example his penchant for the hexameter pattern DDSS), although on the whole the author of *Carmen* holds "eine Mittelposition zwischen den beiden Klassikern", a middle position between the two classics, Virgil and Ovid.⁷⁵

The inspiration from Ovid is nevertheless not limited to the formal level of the poem alone (as was the case with the Virgilian inspiration).⁷⁶ Clemens Weidmann has identified several episodes ("Szenenkomplexe") from the *Metamorphoses* upon which several passages from *Carmen* are based.⁷⁷ The manner and degree of imitation nevertheless vary. Various motifs – but no single word-for-word quotation – are taken from the account of the Creation at the opening of *Metamorphoses* (*met.* 1, 5–88) and incorporated into the similarly-themed hymn in the mother's prayer, preceding her address to the last son (*Carmen* 302–314), where they are combined with Biblical motifs taken from the first chapter of *Genesis*. There are a number of parallels between the story of Phaethon (*met.* 1, 747–2, 149) and particularly the mother's discourses, in which she admonishes her sons to be valorous. One can here find both word-for-word collocations (e.g. 205: *qui temperat orbem*, 273: *puerilibus annis*, 302: *caeli terraeque marisque*)⁷⁸ and other turns of phrase (187: *finierat ... monitus*, 275: *concupiant animo*),⁷⁹ as well as parallels in terms of vocabulary and motifs which rather clearly point to their source in Ovid – e.g. the opening of the mother's speech to the fifth son (243sq.: *si dare complexus matri tibi, nate, liceret, / confiteor, soli post vulnera, nate, dedissem*) is inspired by the opening of the discourse where Sol attempts to persuade Phaethon to relinquish his hazardous wish (*met.* 2, 51sq.: *utinam promissa liceret / non dare! confiteor, solum hoc tibi, nate, negarem*).⁸⁰ Allusions to the story of Phaethon are nonetheless scattered across the entire poem, and it is impossible to find a single passage where they are used systematically and which would

⁷² See Weidmann (1995: 52).

⁷³ See Weidmann (1995: 67).

⁷⁴ Twice in *Carmen*: 88sq. *non poterit post ista tibi rex iste nocere, / sed poteris post haec tu regi, nate, nocere*, and 332sq. *tu, quidquid possunt gentes, potes omnia solus, / et quod non capiunt gentes, capis omnia solus*. On the meaning of this device in Ovid's style see Frings (2005: 65–70), on the importance of repetition in Ovid see Wills (1996: *passim*).

⁷⁵ Weidmann (1995: 59).

⁷⁶ In this respect I tend to agree with Weidmann (1995: 35), who sees in the mother's address to the youngest son only traces of the description of the death of Turnus, rather than with Pavlovskis-Petit (2005: *passim*, without reference to Weidmann), who regards the imitation of Virgil as crucial.

⁷⁷ Weidmann (1995: 35–36) – following examples see *ibidem*.

⁷⁸ See *met.* 1, 770; 2, 55; 2, 96.

⁷⁹ See *met.* 2, 103 and 77 (*concupias*).

⁸⁰ A few verses later this parallel is confirmed by a verse composed of two echoes of the story of Phaethon: 252 *tu modo ne dubites monitis parere parentis*, see *met.* 2, 44 *quoque minus dubites ...* and 2, 126 *... m. p. p.* – Similarly one can find a parallel between the description of the death of the third son (*Carmen* 193sq. *non flamma comas, non contigit ora; / corpus ut exanimum flammis superarat et ignes*) and the scene where Sol is seeing his son off on his journey (*met.* 2, 122–124 *tum pater ora sui sacro medicamine nati / contigit et rapidae fecit patientia flammae / imposuitque comae radios*). It is also from this scene that the expression from the above-cited verse 252 is taken.

be based around the confrontation with this specific passage from Ovid. It thus seems instead that the anonymous author was compelled to use these borrowed motifs and expressions by an underlying similarity of theme, which is nevertheless – as Weidmann notes⁸¹ – based on contrast, though a relatively simple one: the admonishing tone of the *mater Macchabaeorum* to her sons has exactly the opposite meaning of the words of Sol warning the foolish Phaethon of the devastating fire.

The third Ovidian paradigm, again used in counterpoint, cited by Weidmann is the story of Niobe (*met.* 6, 146–312), which is evoked in the minds of readers through means of “several allusions” (“mit einigen Anspielungen”).⁸² Sometimes these consist merely of verbal and metric borrowings that do not effect the content (e.g. 132 *tacito ... murmure*, see *met.* 6, 203)⁸³ or of a borrowed motif,⁸⁴ while in other passages there occur more obvious semantic parallels, where the reference to the original context enriches the meaning – for instance the ironic exclamation of the powerless King towards the mother in the middle of the narrative (230 *gaude, laetare, triumpha*) is reminiscent of Niobe’s cry of despair at the death of her sons addressed to Leto (*met.* 6, 283 *exsulta victrixque inimica triumpha*), but this nonetheless gives way to a new expression of blasphemy that brings about her ultimate demise, which in fact also awaits the King.⁸⁵ Still, if we can identify the inspiration in the story of Niobe from *Metamorphoses* in these few allusions alone, it would indeed appear secondary by comparison with either the concentration of references to the myth of Creation or the scattered allusions to Phaethon. Weidmann however indicates in other passages the possibility that the story of Niobe played a more substantial role in the composition of *Carmen* – for example, that it inspired the poet to illustrate the paradoxical situation where the mother refuses to be swayed by the death of the children.⁸⁶ I understand Weidmann’s insights as another argument in favour of the hypothesis outlined above that the story of Niobe was not merely the source of minor semantic variegation but an underlying principle, from which the whole Biblical subject matter is stylized in the poem.

Conclusion: From Anti-Niobe to Anti-Metamorphosis

The last remaining question is to try to find the motivation which might have compelled the anonymous poet to use such a stylization for a recounting of the Maccabee narrative. The artistic reasons are quite obvious. The story of Niobe was notorious and considered to have been long since rendered banal by countless paraphrases in both scho-

⁸¹ Weidmann (1995: 36).

⁸² Weidmann (1995: 36).

⁸³ See also 73 *finierat primi partus fecunda dolorem*, compare *met.* 6, 272 *finierat moriens pariter cum luce dolorem*.

⁸⁴ See for example 299 *perque et sua vulnera victrix*, compare with *met.* 6, 285 *post tot quoque funera vinco*. For other parallels with Niobe see Weidmann (1995: 73–74, 130, 151, 152, 179, 180, 222 [ad v. 195], 223, 253, 311).

⁸⁵ It seems that this whole discourse of the King is replete with references to Ovid’s Niobe – see Weidmann (1995: 239–243).

⁸⁶ Weidmann (1995: 51): “Er (der Dichter) entwirft eine „verkehrte Welt“, in der eine Mutter ihre sieben Kinder zum Tod im Feuer antreibt; er zeichnet sie, wie auch aus der Rezeption der entsprechenden ovidischen Szene hervorgeht, als eine Art „Anti-Niobe“: See also *ibidem*: 273: “Es zeigt sich abermals, daß für ihre Charakterisierung die ovidische Niobe das Vorbild abgibt”.

lastic *ethopoeiae* and in poetry – Nemesianus cites it already in the latter half of the 3rd century as an example of a mythological subject which has been used too often: *Nam quis non Nioben numeroso funere maestam / iam cecinit?*⁸⁷ Any sort of reference to it, however subtle, would thus instantly be grasped by the well-educated reader.⁸⁸ The similarity of both stories might have been patently obvious to audiences of the period; in any case the author of *Carmen* augmented this with his own stylization, therefore increasing the probability that readers would interpret the Biblical narrative against the background of Ovid. Such a reading creates a rather powerful effect of counterpoint between both female figures: whereas Niobe violates the religious taboo and as punishment is turned to stone, the mother of the Maccabee brothers does not give in to the pressure of the King's violence and refuses to renounce the hereditary religious interdicts – her reward (a blissful death) constitutes one of the innovations of *Carmen* in opposition to its prose sources. The idea of the mother's persistence is enhanced by the fact that she does not alter her stance even with the imminent death of her last son – on the contrary, her words gain even greater urgency – whereas Niobe, whose attitude is negative in its motivation, in the end relents and begs on behalf of her last daughter.⁸⁹ This overall contrast as a poetic device strongly augments both the artistic and theological message of the poem.

From the point of view of cultural history the author's intention may have been to Christianize a well-known mythological subject in order to exploit its semantic potential for the purposes of Christian subject matter. Such ambitions are common in the tradition of Roman Biblical epic poetry – Juvencus for example Christianized the figure of Aeneas,⁹⁰ Proba and other Centonists refashioned various parts of Virgil's oeuvre (ranging from isolated verses to the account of the storm in *Aeneid*, or some passages of the *Georgics*),⁹¹ while the minor Biblical epics *Carmen de Sodoma* and *Carmen de Iona* remodel individual stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.⁹²

The two last-named poems also share with *Carmen de martyrio Macchabaeorum* a close link with Ovid, to his style and vocabulary as well as themes that may be regarded as characteristic features of the sub-genre of a Biblical epyllium. It is nevertheless also possible that the author of *Carmen* went even further – not being content with a mere adoption of Ovid's framework for his story, which the choice of this peculiar sub-genre offered (as a possibility). For one of the main themes of his poem is the contrast of constancy (of the mother and her sons) and change (of attitude) which the King struggles for and which is mostly expressed by some form of the verb *mutare*, which here carries a negative tinge⁹³ – see for instance the programmatic declaration of the King's efforts

⁸⁷ *Nem. cyn.* 15–16.

⁸⁸ The story of Niobe had a similar status also in the Greek tradition, particularly in that of rhetoric (in this case, the reference text is Homer, *Il.* XXIV, 599–620) – see e.g. Ziadé (2007: 242): “L'éthopée de la mère pleurant la mort de ses enfants, incarnée au travers du personnage de Niobé, était un classique des *Exercices préparatoires*”, and *ibidem*, note 322 : „Incarnant la douleur par excellence, son mythe fut repris dans toute l'Antiquité”

⁸⁹ *Ov. met.* 6: 298–300: [...] *ultima restabat; quam toto corpore mater / tota veste tegens 'unam minimamque relinque! / de multis minimam posco' clamavit 'et unam.'*

⁹⁰ See for example Šubrť (1993).

⁹¹ See Bažil (2008: 143–164, 170–176 *et passim*).

⁹² See for example Hexter (1988) or Morisi (1991: 176–177, esp. on the reception of the myth of Phaethon).

⁹³ In the text of the *Carmen* the motif of change occurs repeatedly – see Pizzolato – Somenzi (2005: 173, note 20), cited word-for-word by Pizzolato (2007: 181, note 15).

as early as 7sq.: *rex ... mutare fidem, mutare timorem / iustorum voluit*, and the mother's retort: *nil mutare potes* in v. 31. The suspense (if there indeed is any in the poem) springs from the tension of whether the mother will withstand this test until the very end, holding out against the pressure to change. It is therefore possible that the anonymous poet not only conceived his female figure as a Christian anti-Niobe, but that the entire poem, which presents a paean to constancy and endurance, relies for its power also on the contrast with Ovid's concept of perpetual change, the antinomy of the Christian God granting constancy and the pagan deities as guarantors of this mutability (*di ... vos mutastis et illas*, Ov. *met.* 2) – and that it is thus a sort of anti-*Metamorphosis*.

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**NIOBA CHRISTIANA?
LE CARMEN DE MARTYRIO MACCHABAEORUM TARDO-ANTIQUE
ET L'HISTOIRE OVIDIENNE DE NIOBÉ**

Résumé

Dans sa manière de traiter l'histoire vétéro-testamentaire des sept martyrs Maccabées, le *Carmen de martyrio Macchabaeorum* anonyme (IV^e–V^e siècle après J.-C.) diffère considérablement de ses sources (*II* et *IV Mcc*) : il met surtout l'accent sur le personnage de la mère, relègue les fils au second plan et change l'histoire du martyr en combat rhétorique et moral entre la mère et le roi-tyran. L'article développe l'hypothèse que ces modifications sont dues à une stylisation volontaire, rapprochant le poème de l'histoire de Niobé des *Métamorphoses* d'Ovide. Un tel rapprochement servirait à souligner le contraste du comportement des deux figures féminines.

**NIOBA CHRISTIANA?
POZDNĚANTICKÉ CARMEN DE MARTYRIO MACCHABAEORUM
A OVIDIOVSKÝ PŘÍBĚH O NIOBĚ**

Shrnutí

Způsobem zpracování látky, starozákonního příběhu o sedmi makabejských mučednicích, se anonymní *Carmen de martyrio Macchabaeorum* (4.–5. století po Kr.) výrazně liší od svých pramenů (*II* a *IV Mcc*): zejména staví do středu postavu matky, syny odsouvá do pozadí a mění mučednický příběh v řečnický souboj mezi matkou a tyranským králem. V článku je vyslovena hypotéza, že tyto změny vyplývají z vědomé stylizace, která báseň přibližuje příběhu o Niobě v Ovidiových *Proměnách*. Cílem takové stylizace by mohlo být zdůraznit kontrast mezi oběma ženskými postavami coby symboly křesťanské a tradiční (pohanské) etiky.