ARCTOS

ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

VOL. X

HELSINKI 1976 HELSINGFORS

INDEX

MAGNUM FAS NEFASQUE
Horace's Epode 5, 87—88

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Horace's fifth Epode is a difficult poem. The poet depicts a horrid scene: in order to acquire a love-potion, the ugly sorceress Canidia and her gruesome companions are about to torture to death a helpless boy, whose pitiful pleadings open the dramatic poem and who concludes it with bitter imprecations on his torturers. The detailed description of the witches' magic rituals has led some commentators to assert that the poem is inspired by actual experiences of Horace.[1] On the other hand, the general tone of the poem is cold and apathetic. The poem contains hyperboles and conventional images so that some critics regard it as a purely literary piece.[2] V. Pöschl's statement on Horace's poetry[3] also holds true of the fifth Epode: "Die Dichtung des Horaz ist zugleich Selbstbekenntnis und Lehre, persönlich und repräsentativ, aus der individuellen Erfahrung erwachsen und traditioneller Prägungen sich bedienend." The blending of life and literature is particularly characteristic of the Epodes, which Horace wrote at a time of momentous events, a time of upheaval; still unsure of himself, he was seeking his way in society and shaping a poetic manner that was to constitute a vehicle for expressing his vision of reality.

Modern editors and commentators are not unanimous in their interpretations of lines 87—88 of the fifth Epode. The poem is now nearing its end and in a grandiloquent tone the dying boy bursts out with his "Thyestean curses" on his torturers: *sed dubius unde rumperet silentium, misit Thyesteas preces: 'Venena magnum fas nefasque non valent convertere humanam vicem* ... This is the reading of the mss. From numerous interpretations I select only four, which can be found in modern editions of Horace:[4] (a) *venena maga non fas nefasque, non valent convertere humanam vicem* (e.g. Baiter—Hirschfelder 1886, Bennet 1914, Plessis 1924), (b) *venena magnum fas nefasque non valent convertere, humanam vicem* (Villeneuve 1954), (c) *venena magnum fas nefasque, non valent convertere humanam vicem* (Wickham—Garrod 1912, Klingner 1959[3]), (d) *venena*

1 See Heinze's introduction to the Epode.

2 E.g. L.P. Wilkinson, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 2 (1953), 119: "I take it that the 5th and 17th Epode are purely literary pieces, mimes in the iambic vein, powerful studies in horror, hatred, denunciation, mockery, macabre." Cf. E. Fraenkel, Horace, Oxford 1957, 61—65.

3 Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 2 (1953), 93.

4 For the discussion of numerous suggestions made by scholars prior to the 20th century see O. Keller, Epilegomena zu Horaz, Leipzig 1879—80, vol. II, 372—74, and I.G. Orelli in Orelli-Baiter-Hirschfelder's edition.

magica fas nefasque, non valent convertere humanam vicem (Kiessling—Heinze 1930, Färber 1964). (a) and (b) are similar in regarding *fas nefasque* as the object of *non valent convertere;* (a) is grammatically easier but is based on a conjecture *(maga non* pro *magnum* first presented by Haupt); in identifying *fas nefasque* with *humanam vicem* both suggestions, however, fail to account for the opposition of divine and human which, in my opinion is implied in the boy's words.[5] This opposition is represented in interpretations (c) an (d), but they are grammatically difficult and, in my opinion, unacceptable: the meaning is conveyed not on the basis of Horace's Latin words but by applying the commentators' considerations to the text; it is hardly possible to allow in Horace's Latin an ellipse or a zeugma which supposes the negative *non valent convertere* to have a positive meaning in relation to *fas nefasque ('.. valent quidem confundere..'):* "Zaubermittel vermögen zwar die Schranken zwischen *fas* und *nefas* niederzureissen, vermögen aber nicht, das Gesetz menschlicher Vergeltung umzustossen" (Heinze).

Heinze, in fact, adapts Porphyrio's explanation of *humanam vicem* to the whole Latin sentence: *Quamvis venena multum possint, non tamen valent merita in contrariam vertere, ut liberentur poena, qui male mereantur. Vices autem appellantur poenae, quae in scelerosis admissis regeruntur.* But Porphyrio is prudent enough not to assume a difficult zeugmatic construction. In his opinion, *fas nefasque* is an attribute of *venena: Magnum fas venena sunt, si hostibus dentur, magnum nefas, si amicis.* Although Porphyrio's explanation meets the demands of Latinity, it is hardly appropriate to the context of the sentence. To consider *venena* instruments of right and wrong is an ad hoc explanation which does not correspond to the general spirit of the Epode.

Most critics think that *fas nefasque* must be part of the object of the sentence, 'something that is converted or confused by the poisons' (cf. Ov.met. 6, 585—86 *fasque nefasque confusura ruit).*[6] But why not regard it as part of the subject, 'something that converts or changes'; *fas* and *nefas* can also be active in meaning (e.g. Sen.Thy. 138—39 *fas valuit nihil aut commune nefas;* Val.Flacc. 1, 792 *ultricesque deae fasque).*[7] In my opinion, *venena* and *magnum fas nefasque,* which are asyndetically coordinated, form the subject part of the sentence. The whole setting resembles the well-known asyndeta sollemnia,[8] and is thus appropriate to the solemn or mock-solemn character of the poem. With *magnum fas nefasque* the poet describes the horrible act of the witches in torturing the innocent boy to death in order to obtain a love philtre: at the same time he refers to the

5 Cf. Serv. Verg. georg. 1, 269.
6 See also Verg.georg. 1, 505; Hor.carm. 1, 18, 10—11; Ov.ars. 1, 739.
7 Cf. Verg.Aen. 2, 779; 6, 438; Lucan. 8, 484.
8 See Kühner-Stegmann-Thierfelder II, 149—154.

monstrosity of the Thyestean meal.[9] The meaning of the sentence is: "Not the poisons, not even the monstrous act which confuses the norms of right and wrong is able to change human fate." This was my first impression when I read the Epode. But after reading the commentators I became uncertain and needed further evidence to support my view.[10] My interpretation does have the following advantages: (a) the syntax of the sentence is easy to understand, (b) the opposition of divine and human is retained, (c) the interpretation emphasizes the distinction between *venena* and *fas nefasque,* that is to say, the difference between common crimes and an impious, unnatural act, (d) there is no problem in *convertere humanam vicem* "to change human fate" (the meaning "human retribution" would presuppose *avertere,* not *convertere*).

There is no doubt that the phrase *magnum fas nefasque* is possible in Latin; cf. Sen.Phaedr. 143 *maius . . . nefas;* Liv. 6, 14, 10 *per omne fas ac nefas* (Lucan. 5, 313; Sen.Oed. 1023); Tac.hist. 2, 56 *in omne fas nefasque.* Compared with *omne* the adjective *magnum* emphasizes the meaning of a single monstrous act. Logically the adjective *magnum* or *omne* qualifies the *nefas,* but we should not look for logic in proverbial expressions of this kind. Furthermore it is worth noticing that the whole pairing of *fas* and *nefas* is illogical and only serves the purpose of emphasis.[11] Heinze defends Bentley's conjecture of *magica* pro *magnum: "magica* ist eine ansprechende Vermutung Bentleys für das einhellig überlieferte sinnlose *magnum".* This is a dangerous practice in textual criticism. Firstly, why should we not allow our Greek and Roman poets to say something 'sinnloses'. Secondly, in my opinion, *magnum* is not 'sinnloses' but a result of the words of Canidia that precede the boy's imprecations. Canidia says (lines 61—62, 77—78): *cur dira barbarae minus venena Medeae valent . . . : maius parabo, maius infundam tibi fastidienti poculum.* Thus the boy's answer to Canidia's incantation complies with the reader's expectations: 'Not poisons, but not even something more effective is able . . .' This is one reason why I think that *magnum fas nefasque* must be asyndetically coordinated with *venena.* The mere 'the poisons are not able' would only be a statement of a fact which the sorceress has already admitted.

When explaining the boy's words many commentators forget about the previous line: *misit Thyesteas preces.* The attentive reader

9 For the meaning 'normal' and 'abnormal' of *fas* and *nefas,* H. Fugier, Recherches sur l'expression du sacré dans la langue latine, Paris 1963, 127—152.

10 On scepticism in reading commentaries, G. Williams, Horace, Oxford 1972 (Greece&Rome. New Surveys in the Classics No. 6) 1—5.

11 Cf. K. Heraeus' comment on Tac.hist. 2, 56: "Zum Behufe einer möglichst erschöpfenden Bestimmung des Begriffes *nefas* wird der Gegensatz *fas* mit in den Kreis der Anschauung hineingezogen."

does not,[12] but associates the heinous act of killing the innocent boy with the horrible crimes of Pelopidae. The *cena Thyestea* was a favorite theme of Roman tragedians. Although before Seneca we only have fragments of tragedies dealing with the crimes of Atreus and Thyestes, we know from the quotations made by Cicero (from Ennius' Thyestes in Tusc. 1, 107 and in Pis. 43; from Accius' Atreus in de orat. 3, 219, nat.deor. 3, 68 and Tusc. 4,77) that the "Thyestean curses" had become proverbial among the Romans, and consequently the meal of Thyestes served as a *magnum exemplum* of an enormous crime.[13] The enormity is particularly emphasized in Seneca's tragedy Thyestes (cf. 138—39 *fas valuit nihil aut commune nefas)* in which the words *fas* and *nefas* occur frequently. Horace is parodying the solemn style of tragedies. Canidia says (77—78): *maius parabo, maius infundam tibi fastidienti poculum;* in Accius' tragedy Atreus is preparing his horrible revenge against Thyestes (fr. 165 Warmington): *maior mihi moles, maius miscendumst malum.* Also the stoning mentioned in lines 97—98 fits in with Horace's habit of including ingredients of tragedy in his poem (cf. Aesch.Agam. 1615—16).[14]

Although I agree with the critics who emphasize the imaginative and literary character of the Epode, it must be admitted that the poem also has its serious tone. Firstly it is an iambic poem, i.e. an invective. Horace is ridiculing or attacking somebody, a real woman or a type of person. The iambic character, *animus Archilochi,* is clearly presented in the concluding lines *(Neque hoc parentes, heu mihi superstites, effugerit spectaculum),* which echo the Greek iambist's saying 'this I would see' (Archil. fr. 79 Diehl).[15] In his "Thyestean curses" the dying boy prophesies to the sorceresses that their punishment will be disturbance of the mind, unending terror, the hatred of the crowd and public ignominy. It is interesting to note that these curses do not resemble the famous imprecations of Thyestes as presented by Ennius (fr. 366—70 Warmington). In Ennius' tragedy Thyestes prays that Atreus will suffer shipwreck with all its consequences. We find the explanation in Cicero's speech against Piso (43—44): *Neque vero ego . . . morbum aut mortem aut cruciatum precarer. Thyestea est ista exsecratio . . . Non ferrem autem moleste, si ita accidisset; sed id tamen esset humanum.* Disease, death, or torture; each of them is *humanum,* "a fate to which any man is liable". Correspondingly Horace's *humanam vicem* refers to the boy's fate, not to the witches' punishment. What then is

12 For the demand on the reader's imagination, G. Williams, Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry, Oxford 1968, 171—249.

13 Cf. Ov. epist. ex Ponto 4, 6, 45—50; other examples included, for instance, Medea's and Procne's crimes, see, e.g., Ov.met. 6, 585 ff.

14 There is no need to speak as Heinze does about Roman "Lynchjustiz".

15 See Fraenkel, 28—30. Heinze fails to understand the mockery of the concluding lines: "Es erhöht aber die Sympathie mit dem armen Jungen, dass sein letzter Gedanke den Eltern gilt."

punishment or retribution? Cicero answers (43): *Id mea sententia, quod accidere nemini potest nisi nocenti, suscepta fraus, impedita et oppressa mens, bonorum odium, nota inusta senatus, amissio dignitatis.* And he goes further in his attack on his enemies (46): *plura etiam acciderunt quam vellem...: mihi enim numquam venerat in mentem furorem et insaniam optare vobis, in quam incidistis.* The nature of Horace's invective is more readily understandable in the light of Cicero's words. Horace also condemns Canidia and her fellow witches to a punishment which is more than a "human" fate; and the detailed description of their wicked machinations is designed to show that they have already fallen into a frenzied lunacy. The attack is effective, if the mask of Canidia concealed not a professional sorceress but a real woman acting the part of a sorceress.[16]

The Epode contains a serious note of another kind, that of the "philosophy" or "religion" of the poet. The poem opens with a prayer to the celestial gods (if there are any) and ends without mention of them (lines 83—86): *sub haec puer iam non, ut ante mollibus lenire verbis impias, sed dubius unde rumperet silentium, misit Thyesteas preces.* If a *magnum fas nefasque* is possible, if people can commit crimes which exceed the divine norms, then the gods exist in Epicurean peace and human life is a "spectacle of Fortune's ruthless sport" (Fraenkel, 256).[17]

16 Cf. Hor.carm. 1, 25. See L. Herrmann, Latomus 17 (1958) 665—68.

17 The word *dubius* seems to have a philosophical meaning. It is interesting to compare Horace's Epode with Claudius Claudianus' poem attacking Rufinus (carm. 3), in which Thyestes' fate is also mentioned by way of illustration (line 84). The poem begins: *Saepe mihi dubiam traxit sententia mentem, curarent superi terras an nullus inesset rector et incerto fluerent mortalia casu.*