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# ON THE PROBLEM OF CATALEPTON 3

Erik Wistrand

This is the text of the epigram as given in the recent Oxford edition.<sup>1</sup>

*Aspice, quem valido subnixum Gloria regno  
altius et caeli sedibus extulerat.*

*Terrarum hic bello magnum concusserat orbem,  
hic reges Asiae fregerat, hic populos;*

*Hic grave servitium tibi iam, tibi, Roma, ferebat  
(cetera namque viri cuspide conciderant),*

*Cum subito in medio rerum certamine praiceps  
corruit e patria pulsus in exilium.*

*Tale deae numen, tali mortalia nutu  
fallax momento temporis † hora dedit.*<sup>2</sup>

In this poem the reader's attention is called to a certain prince, who has the support of a mighty kingdom and is exalted above the firmament by Glory.<sup>3</sup> He had convulsed the wide world with war, had crushed the kings and peoples of Asia, and was threatening to subject even Rome herself, his only remaining opponent, to grim slavery. But well on his way in his struggle for world-power he collapsed, all of a sudden, falling headlong, and was driven into exile from his own country. Such is the divine power of the Goddess, with such a forceful nod will the deceitful Hour in an instant wreck mortal life.

The same theme is treated by Ovid in *Epistulae ex Ponto* 4, 3, 29 ff. His examples are Croesus, Pompey and Marius. The conclusion shows a palpable likeness to the corresponding verses in *Catalepton* 3. They run, v. 49 f.:

<sup>1</sup> Appendix Vergiliana recognoverunt . . . W. V. CLAUSEN, F. R. D. GOODYEAR, E. J. KENNEY, J. A. RICHMOND, Oxford 1966.

<sup>2</sup> There are many attempts at conjectural emendation here: *hora rapit, ruit, premit, ferit* etc. My own guess is *hora adigit*. Compare Verg. *Aen.* 9, 106 (Jupiter) *totum nutu tremefecit Olympum* and *ibidem* 6, 594 (Juppiter) *telum contorsit . . . praecipitemque immani turbine adigit*. For the elision compare *Catalepton* 4, 2 *tangere quas terras quosque videre homines*.

<sup>3</sup> The same sense as in the Vergilian *fama super aethera notus* (*Aen.* 1, 379).

*Ludit in humanis divina potentia rebus  
et certam praesens vix feret hora diem.*

*Divina potentia*, referring back to v. 29 *Fortuna*, confirms that *tale deae numen* is the goddess of Fortune.

Who is the victim of fickle Fortune? Can he be identified with a known historical person? Six candidates have been proposed, three Romans: Scipio Africanus, Pompey and Antony, and three oriental kings: Alexander the Great, Mithridates VI of Pontus and Phraates IV of Parthia.<sup>1</sup> A few scholars have considered that the poem referred to no particular person but to a fictitious character, details of whose fate were drawn from various origins.<sup>2</sup> But this is certainly a desperate solution, implying a very forced interpretation of an epigram, in which the reader is asked to view a particularly striking example of Fortune's arbitrary and reckless treatment of man, an example depicted with a lot of concrete detail.<sup>3</sup>

First I think we can eliminate the Roman candidates. The prince in view is said to have the support of a mighty kingdom. It is true that Roman magnates were often criticized by their adversaries for possessing, or aiming at, *regnum* in the sense of *dominatio*, *tyrannis*. In our context, however, *regnum* is clearly not meant to imply a contrast or a menace to *res publica*. It is thanks to the power of his own country — the stress is on *valido* — that the prince was able to conquer other nations in Asia and menace even Rome, that is menace her with defeat and subjugation<sup>4</sup> under a victorious foreign power. We must conclude that *regnum* designates a great power in the East. This interpretation will automatically exclude Scipio and Pompey. Neither based his power on an Eastern kingdom. Antony did, but that does not take us very far, because lines 7—8 do not in any way fit Antony's situation after Actium.

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of opinions and arguments see the excellent commentary on Catalepton by R. E. H. WESTENDORP BOERMA (I, Groningen 1949, p. 41 ff. II, Assen 1963, p. 116) and E. MARMORALE, *Pertinenze e impertinenze*, Napoli 1960, p. 114 ff.

<sup>2</sup> So W. E. GILLESPIE, in the *Class. Journal* 35 (1939—40), p. 106 ff., and K. BÜCHNER in his great article on Vergil in *RE*, col. 52 f.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to deny that a type as well as an individual can be employed as an *exemplum*. Compare Sen. epist. 56, 6 ff. *illa tranquillitas vera est, in quam bona mens explicatur*. (7) *Aspice illum, cui somnus laxae domus silentio quaeritur, cuius aures ne qui agitet sonus, omnis servorum turba conticuit et suspensum accedentium propius vestigium ponitur; huc nempe versatur atque illuc, somnum inter aegritudines levem captans: quae non audit, audisse se queritur*. (8) *Quid in causa putas esse? Animus illi obstreperit*. No individual girl is referred to in Quintil. Decl. 306 (Ritter p. 202, 19) *Vis scire, quid sint nuptiae? — Aspice illam virginem, quam pater tradidit, euntem die celebri, comitante populo*.

<sup>4</sup> For *servitium* in this sense cf. Tac. hist. 4,54, 1 *Vitellianae legiones vel externum servitium quam imperatorem Vespasianum malle*; Cassiod. Var. 2, 41, 2 *nationem partim ferro, partim servitio subiugatam*.

Alexander the Great must be rejected. Lines 7—8 will simply not do as a description of Alexander's ultimate fate. It has been suggested that *subito . . . corruit . . . pulsus in exilium* might refer to Alexander's passing away from a fever in Babylon or to his being buried in Alexandria. I leave it to my readers to appraise the plausibility of these hypotheses.

A better candidate is Mithridates. He certainly won fame, had military successes and was reputed a serious menace to Rome. All of this could be described in lines 1—6 with an amount of rhetorical exaggeration not exceeding what might be expected in the context. And he was forced to leave his country and withdraw into Armenia both in 72 B.C., after he had been worsted by Lucullus, and in 66, when Pompey defeated him. Either of these retreats could be represented as an exile. But then we meet with a great difficulty. The downfall and exile of Mithridates can hardly be said to have happened *subito . . . in medio rerum certamine*. Mithridates' earlier career was less conspicuous for unflinching success in battle than for pertinacity in vicissitudes and adversity. He is surely not acceptable as an instance of how men are deceived into security and taken unawares by fickle Fortune, which is the implication of *fallax hora* and *momento temporis* in the last line. Then there is also a chronological problem to take into account. Since it seems obvious that the poet, if he had known of the impressive drama of Mithridates' final struggle and suicide, would not have chosen the less spectacular misfortune of exile as an example to illustrate Fortune's capriciousness, the poem would have to have been composed before Mithridates' death in 63, most probably in connection with the king's first sojourn in Armenia. This date would make it considerably earlier than any other poem in the Appendix.

Phraates IV, king of Parthia, succeeded to the throne in 37 B.C. In the following years he successfully beat off repeated Roman attempts to invade Parthia, which were made under the command of Antony and his legates. His most brilliant exploit was a surprise attack on Antony's army in 36, in which he annihilated two Roman legions, taking their eagles and adding them to those captured under his predecessor from Crassus in 53 and Decidius Saxa in 40, a national disgrace to be deeply felt in Rome.<sup>1</sup> The kings of Armenia and Media who had allied themselves with the Romans were taken prisoner and

Similarly *servitus*: Cic. Cat. 4, 10, 21 *sit aeterna gloria Marius, qui bis Italiam obsidione et metu servitutis liberavit*.

<sup>1</sup> This is the second of the Roman reverses alluded to by Horace, *carm.* 3, 6, 9 ff. *cum bis Monaeses et Pacori manus | non auspicatos contudit impetus | nostros et adiecisse praedam | torquibus exiguis renidet*.

their countries overrun. When Antony had to withdraw his troops against the final contest with Octavian, Phraates' triumph seemed assured. But in 32 or 31 a rebellion broke out among his own subjects headed by Tiridates, and he was forced to flee his own country and seek refuge among the Scythians. He was restored in 30 with the aid of Scythian troops, and it was Tiridates' turn to go into exile. The latter passed into Roman territory and sought the protection of Octavian. He regained power in Parthia temporarily (about 27—25 B. C.). As far as I can see our poem applies exactly in all particulars to the known history of Phraates up to his restoration in 30. This has already been amply demonstrated by H. NETTLESHIP.<sup>1</sup> NETTLESHIP's interpretation has, however, met with little success. The verdict of E. GALLETIER,<sup>2</sup> which is quoted verbatim and with approval by WESTENDORP BOERMA (op. cit. p. 49), runs: »Nous ne croyons pas que Phraates, plus que Mithridate, ait mérité les éloges hyperboliques que notre auteur adresse au conquérant inconnu; nous ne pensons pas surtout qu'un Romain eût pu, sur ce ton d'indifférence et avec tant de calme, parler d'un de ces Parthes, qui avaient fait périr Crassus et infligé à Rome une blessure qui saignait encore.» MARMORALE (op. cit. p. 118 f.) repeats the main argument with emphasis: »l'oscurità stessa del personaggio e l'esiguità delle sue imprese lo mettono fuori discussione, così che è inutile anche formulare obiezioni.»

Let us however remember that it is not a question here of the real dimensions of the king's achievements and how dangerous he actually was, but of rumours and opinions in the Roman world, and of poetical exaggeration to stress the contrast between previous glory and greatness and sudden ensuing catastrophe. Now it appears from contemporary literature that Phraates was well-known in Rome and that Parthia was considered a dangerous and aggressive rival of the Roman empire. The name of Phraates occurs in Hor. *carm.* 2, 2, 17 and *epist.* 1, 12, 27. The Parthian danger is often referred to, e.g. Verg. *Ge.* 1, 509 *hinc movet Euphrates, illinc Germania bellum*; Hor. *epod.* 7, 10 f. *ut secundum vota Parthorum sua | urbs haec periret dextera*; *carm.* 1, 2, 22 *graves Persae*; *ibid.* 1, 12, 53 *Parthos Latio imminentes*. The Romans were generally inclined to suspect foreign nations of planning to attack them. Not only Germans, Dacians and Parthians but even unwarlike Indians could be thought of as menacing Rome, cp. Verg. *Ge.* 2, 171 f. (Octavian), *qui nunc extremis*

<sup>1</sup> See H. NETTLESHIP, *Ancient Lives of Vergil with an Essay on the Poems of Vergil in Connection with his Life and Times*, Oxford 1879, p. 34 ff.

<sup>2</sup> E. GALLETIER, *Epigrammata et Priapea*, Paris 1920 (Budé) p. 157.

*Asiae iam victor in oris / imbellem avertis Romanis arcibus Indum.* This distrustful attitude is another aspect of their own imperialism.<sup>1</sup>

It should be emphasized that the primary subject of the poem is not king Mithridates but the power of Fortune. We must allow for the picture of the king being coloured by the author's wish to bring out clearly the effects of the Goddess's changed attitude. He is just regarded as a suitable example to illustrate fickle Fortune's power. He should be an impressive example, since as the Great King, the successor to the Great Kings of old Persia, he ought to be above misfortune. It is something of a paradox to find him a helpless victim of a whim of the goddess of fortune. This idea is also found in Horace: *carm. 1, 34, 12 ff. valet ima summis / mutare, et insignem attenuat deus / obscura promens; hinc apicem rapax / Fortuna cum stridore acuto / sustulit, hic posuisse gaudet.* Here, in all probability, Phraates and Tiridates are alluded to, cp. *carm. 1, 26, 3 ff. Quis sub Arcto / rex gelidae metuatur orae, / quid Tiridaten terreat, unice / securus.* Most instructive is *carm. 2, 2, 17 ff. redditum Cyri solio Phraaten / dissidens plebi numero beatorum / eximit virtus, populumque falsis / dedocet uti / vocibus, regnum et diadema tutum / deferens uni propriamque laurum, / quisquis ingentis oculo inretorto / spectat acervos.* The popular view appears in *carm. 3, 9, 4 Persarum vigui rege beatior.* The idea that even the Great King must fear fickle Fortune is elaborated in *Sen. Thy. 598 ff. Ima permutat levis hora summis. / Ille qui donat diadema fronti, / quem genu nixae tremuere gentes, / cuius ad nutum posuere bella / Medus et Phoebi propioris Indus / et Dahae Parthis equitem minati, / anxius sceptrum tenet et moventes / cuncta divinat metuitque casus / mobiles rerum dubiumque tempus.*

The reluctance of scholars to accept NETTLESHIP's arguments may, I think, partly be ascribed to the commonly held view of the character of the poem. BÜCHELER<sup>2</sup> and BIRT<sup>3</sup> asserted that our poem was a fictitious inscription purporting to have been written on a grave-monument or a statue, and all interpretations seem to be based on the belief that our poem is an epigram in the original sense of the word. If you start from that conviction, you will naturally reflect that there was little chance that the Parthian king should have a monument in Rome or Italy and even less chance that a Roman poet should have asked his readers to visualize and consider such a monument.

It is, however, by no means certain that the epigram with its first word

<sup>1</sup> See HANS MEYER, *Die Aussenpolitik des Augustus und die Augusteische Dichtung*, Köln 1961 (Kölner Historischer Abhandlungen, Bd. 5).

<sup>2</sup> In *Rh. Mus.* 38 (1883) p. 511 ff.

<sup>3</sup> TH. BIRT, *Jugendverse und Heimatpösi Vergils*, Leipzig—Berlin 1910 p. 60 ff.

*aspice* must be taken to call the reader's attention to a monument. In fact, the whole epigram has nothing typical of a *titulus*. We are asked to look at an *exemplum*, not at a statue or a monument.<sup>1</sup>

It is a mistake to believe that *aspicere* can be used only in situations, real or imaginative, when somebody with his physical eyes observes concrete objects; the verb is also used to signify that somebody with his mind's eye examines an idea or an imaginary situation. It is employed thus three times in Publilius Syrus: A 9 *Aspicere oportet quicquid possis perdere*;<sup>2</sup> B 4 *Bonum est fugienda aspicere in alieno malo*; V 21 *Utrumque casum aspicere debet, qui imperat*. The same use of *aspicere* is found in Cic. Tuscul. 2, 7, 18 f. *Tristis enim res est (dolor) sine dubio aspera, amara, inimica naturae, ad patiendum tolerandumque difficilis*. (19) *Aspice Philoctetam, cui concedendum est gementi*. Unwarranted is, I think, the assertion in the commentary of TISCHER-SOROF: »*Aspice*, näml. auf der Bühne (Sonst passte dies Verbum nicht).« Correct POHLENZ: »Namentlich führt es (sc. *aspice*) wie hier Beispiele lebhaft vor Augen.« Compare Cic. de orat. 3, 7, 28 *aspicite nunc eos homines atque intuemini, quorum de facultate quaerimus: suavitatem Isocrates, subtilitatem Lysias, acumen Hyperides, sonitum Aischines, vim Demosthenes habuit*. The illustrative example is not necessarily a person: Verg. Ge. 2, 114 ff. (different soils produce different plants) *aspice et extremis domitum cultoribus orbem / Eoasque domos Arabum pictosque Gelonos: / divisae arboribus patriae*, and Ovid. Amor. 1, 2, 51 f.: *Aspice cognati felicia Caesaris arma: / qua vicit, victos protegit ille manu*. Martial refers to the examples of Jupiter Capitolinus and Domitian to show that even gods must suffer the bereavement of dear children: epigr. 9, 86, 7 *Aspice Tarpeium Palatinumque Tonantem: / ausa nefas Lachesis laesit utrumque Iovem: / numina cum videas duris obnoxia fati, / invidia possis exonerare deos*. Pliny the younger points to the deplorable figure of Regulus the legacy-hunter as a striking instance of the perverseness of social morality in Rome: epist. 2, 20, 12 f. . . . *iam pridem non minora praemia, immo maiora nequitia et improbitas quam pudor et virtus habent*. (13) *Aspice Regulum, qui ex paupere et tenui ad tantas opes per flagitia processit . . .*

Under Emperor Tiberius' harsh rule people gave vent to their discontent

<sup>1</sup> This is recognized by WESTENDORP BOERMA p. 57: »Non statua, sepulchrum, corpus, sed exemplum Pompei velut digito monstratur nostro carmine.« But on p. 42 he endorses BÜCHNER'S view: »Sine dubio cogitandum est de titulo imaginis vel sepulchri, ac quidem potissimum de ficto titulo statuae. BÜCHNER, op. cit. col. 52, prefers the grave alternative.

<sup>2</sup> I do not agree with the translation given in the Loeb edition (J. F. DUFF and A. M. DUFF'S Minor Latin Poets): »You ought to watch whatever you can lose«. I think the meaning must be: »You must consider whatever you can lose (realizing that you can lose any of those things)« just as V 21 means: »A commander must consider both good luck and bad luck (realizing that either can happen)«.

and misgiving in anonymous verses, as Suetonius relates in his biography of Tiberius, chap. 59, where he gives a few examples. In one of these poems the Romans are warned to look upon the dreadful examples of Sulla, Marius and Antony and learn from them that rulers coming from exile will be evil rulers, and be prepared for the worst — a hint at Tiberius' exile on Rhodes.

*Aspice felicem sibi, non tibi, Romule, Sullam  
et Marium, si vis, aspice, sed reducem,  
nec non Antoni civilia bella moventis  
non semel infectas aspice caede manus,  
et dic: Roma perit! Regnavit sanguine multo,  
ad regnum quisquis venit ab exitio.*

The epigram has the same composition as Catalepton 3: first examples, then a conclusion.

Among the epigrams attributed to Seneca there is one, nr. 47, entitled, rather inappropriately, *morte omnes aequari*, which runs:

*Quisquis adhuc non scis fortunae mobile regnum  
nec sortem varias credis habere vices,  
Aspice Alexandri positum venerabile corpus:  
abscondit tantum putris harena virum.*

Here we find not only *aspice* but also a reference to a buried hero; nevertheless this is no *titulus sepulchralis* but a didactic epigram, presenting a doctrine about changing Fortune and proving it with an example. It is rather similar to Catalepton 3, except that doctrine and example are in reverse order.

If Phraates is the king whose vicissitudes are described in Catalepton 3, it follows that the date of composition is round about 30 B.C. That will bring the epigram very near the period when Horace too wrote his reflections on the power of Fortune and the instability of the Parthian throne. Such a date will also suit the metrical technique, which points to 'vorovidische, ja vor-tibullische Zeit' (Büchner, op. cit. col. 52).

The date of the epigram, as well as the fact that Horace shows interest in its subject-matter, might seem to speak in favour of Vergilian authorship. One is reminded of analogous connections: Verg. ecl. 4 and Hor. epod. 16; Verg. Ge. 1, 466 ff and Hor. carm. 1, 2. On the other hand the ideas expressed in our epigram are not very original; they could easily have been suggested to any contemporary poet by the circumstances of the time.