

NEIL ADKIN / LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

Carmen contra paganos 63

The anonymous *Carmen contra paganos* (Anth. 4)¹ attacks a deceased prefect whom many scholars identify as Nicomachus Flavianus the elder, while others favour Vettius Agorius Praetextatus: most recently Alan Cameron has adduced powerful arguments in support of the second.² In the latest critical edition of the *Carmen* its fifth section reads as follows:

*Quis tibi, taurobolus, vestem mutare suavit,
inflatus dives subito mendicus ut esses
obsitus et pannis, modica stipe factus epaeta,
60 sub terra missus, pollutus sanguine tauri
sordidus, infectus, vestes servare cruentas,
vivere cum speras viginti mundus in annis?
Ambieras censor meliorum caedere vitam,
hinc tua confisus possent quod facta latere,
65 cum canibus Megales semper circumdatus esses,
quem lasciva cohors (monstrum) comitaret ovantem!*³

The *meliores* of line 63 (*meliorum caedere vitam*) are generally taken to be Christians.⁴ To such an interpretation Cameron rightly objects that like

¹ Works are cited according to *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae: Index Librorum Scriptorum Inscriptionum*, Leipzig²1990.

² A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (forthcoming); I am grateful to the author for allowing me to see the pertinent chapter before publication. He also argues persuasively that the ascription of the poem to Damasus by the Lobbes MS should be accepted.

³ Text of A. Bartalucci, 'Contro i pagani' *Carmen* cod. Paris. lat. 8084. *Introduzione, testo critico, traduzione e commento*, Pisa 1998 (*Poeti Cristiani* 3), 62.

⁴ So (e. g.) Bartalucci (n. 3), 133f. Particular importance is attached to this verse by scholars who regard Flavian as the poem's target, since they prefer the sole MS's *abieras*, which is understood as an allusion to his departure to do battle with Theodosius; cf. (e. g.) D. Romano, *L'ultimo pagano: Flaviano nello specchio del 'Carmen contra paganos'*, Palermo 1998, 54 ("Qui si allude alla guerra di Flaviano, il quale, dice il poeta, era andato a massacrare coloro che combattevano nelle fila del cristiano

the rest of the passage this line ought instead to concern the *taurobolium*.⁵ He accordingly suggests that *meliorum caedere vitam* should be amended to *meliozem credere vitam* ('believe in a better life'); however he "despairs" of the line's first two words. The aim of the present article is to propose an alternative explanation which would seem to show that the whole of this verse does indeed refer to the *taurobolium*.

Bartalucci's afore-cited text attaches line 62 (*vivere cum speras viginti mundus in annis*) to the foregoing sentence (57–61). Such punctuation would seem however to be unacceptable, since the verse in question provides a clear rationale for the *taurobolium*, whereas this sentence begins by calling the whole procedure into question (57: *quis tibi, taurobolus, vestem mutare suasit ... ?*). Romano has lately reproduced Baehrens' text, which makes this line stand on its own,⁶ however such a reading entails an unnecessary alteration of *cum* to *num*. It would in fact appear that this verse should instead be attached to what follows:⁷ *vestem mutare* (57) and *vestes servare* (61) then frame the sentence in a perfectly symmetrical arrangement.⁸ If lines 57–61 are accordingly taken as a single unit and line 62 is connected with 63, the latter couplet exhibits the same verbal symmetry as the preceding sentence: just as *vestem mutare* and *vestes servare* enfold lines 57–61, so lines 62/63 are similarly inclosed by *vivere* and *vitam*.⁹ If

Teodosio, quindi *meliores*"). *abieras* is however unmetrical; hence editors generally adopt Usener's *ambieras*.

⁵ In this connection he refers to the immediately succeeding verse (64: *hinc tua confisus possent quod facta latere*): in view of the conjunctive *hinc* it is natural to associate these words with the hope expressed in the directly antecedent line 62 for the *munditia* that is conferred by the *taurobolium*.

⁶ Romano (n. 4), 48, repeating E. Baehrens, *Poetae Latini Minores*, 3, Leipzig 1881, 290; *vivere num speras viginti mundus in annos?*

⁷ C. Morel, *Recherches sur un poème latin du IV^e siècle retrouvé par M. L. Delisle*, *Rev. Arch.* n. s. 17 (1868), 455, had also separated line 62 from the foregoing; however he bracketed line 63.

⁸ Both phrases occupy the same *sedes* in the first and last lines respectively, while they also evince the same syntax in which an accusative of *vestis* precedes an infinitive of the first conjugation. The symmetry is further enhanced by the antithetical sense: *mutare / servare*. A. Riese, *Anthologia Latina sive Poesis Latinae Supplementum* 1, 1, Leipzig ²1894, 22, began a new sentence in the middle of line 61 after *infectus* and immediately before *vestes servare cruentas*. Such pointing is however unlikely to be right, since it spoils the afore-mentioned symmetrical scheme; moreover *pollutus sanguine* (60) and *sordidus, infectus* at the start of line 61 are closely linked to *cruentas* at the end of the same line.

⁹ This pair of verses accordingly provides a highly sophisticated instance of the rhetorical figures of *derivatio* (cf. H. Lausberg, *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik*, Stuttgart ³1990, 328f. [no. 648]) together with metrical and syntactic *redditio* (cf. *ib.*,

Cameron's easy emendation of *meliorum* to *meliozem* is adopted, this distich reads as follows:

*vivere cum speras viginti mundus in annis,
ambieras censor meliozem caedere vitam.*

What can be the meaning of the second line?

Virtually the only source on which the Carmen draws is Virgil; however its author possesses a very intimate knowledge of the Mantuan and is massively indebted to him.¹⁰ The same deep familiarity with Virgil was also shared by everyone likely to read the Carmen.¹¹ While in the context of a *taurobolium* the only conceivable 'killing' (*caedere*; 63) can be that of the bull itself,¹² in the whole of Virgil there is only one substantial description of such a tauricide. Virgilian cognoscenti would naturally be put in mind of this striking scene which concludes the long account of the boxing-match between Dares and Entellus in the Funeral Games for Anchises:¹³ here the victorious Entellus rounds off his sacrificial killing of the bull that is his prize with the following taunt: *hanc ... meliozem animam pro morte Daretis / persolvo* (5, 483f.). While *persolvo* can be synonymous with *caedo* in the sense of 'to sacrifice',¹⁴ *anima* is regularly used interchangeably

317f. [nos. 625–627]). It may also be observed that *vivere* and *caedere vitam* generate the same elegant antithesis of meaning as *vestem mutare* and *vestes servare*.

¹⁰ Cf. (e. g.) M. Ihm, Zu lateinischen Dichtern, Rhein. Mus. N. F. 52 (1897), 208 („Der Dichter ist ähnlich zu beurtheilen wie Damasus: er lebt und webt in Vergil.“), referring the reader to id., Die Epigramme des Damasus, Rhein. Mus. N. F. 50 (1895), 194 („Es zeigen sich in seinen Gedichten nur wenig Spuren litterarischer Bildung, er kennt, abgesehen von einigen wenigen schwachen Reminiscenzen an andere, nur einen Dichter, den Vergil, den kennt er aber gründlich, in ihm lebt und webt er, ihm verdankt er ziemlich seinen ganzen Wortschatz.“). It may be recalled that Cameron argues convincingly for Damasian authorship of the Carmen, the extent of whose Virgilian borrowings can be most conveniently apprehended by perusal of the *apparatus fontium* in Romano (n. 4), 45–52.

¹¹ For the overwhelming preponderance of Virgil in the educational system of the late 4th century cf. (e. g.) A. Della Casa, Arusianus Messius: Exempla elocutionum, Milan 1977, 409–420.

¹² The immediately preceding *sanguine tauri* (60) and *cruentas* (61) also reinforce the expectation that *caedere* will have this reference. The noun *caedes* is used of the *taurobolium* in Prudentius, *perist.* 10, 1010.

¹³ The graphic description in question is further highlighted by the arrestingly monosyllabic ending *procumbit humi bos* (5, 481). The word *taurus* itself is given considerable prominence by its repetition in 472f., where it is employed polyptotically and in the same *sedes*.

¹⁴ Cf. Gloss. IV 376, 34 (*persolvit ... sacrificat*); for *caedo* 'i. q. sacrificare' cf. ThL III 62, 80–63, 65 (63, 8f.: *tauro*).

with *vita*:¹⁵ here the Carmen substitutes *vita* for the sake of the *redditio* with the antecedent *vivere*.¹⁶ It would accordingly appear that the Virgilian *meliores animam ... persolvo* is the inspiration of the Carmen's *meliores caedere vitam*.¹⁷ The affirmation that the slaughtered bull is 'better' than the human being in question is a godsend for an invective against a tauroboliate: Virgil's "brutal scoff"¹⁸ is the best insult in the whole Carmen.¹⁹

If then the second half of verse 63 is concerned with the *taurobolium*, it becomes possible to supply a satisfactory explanation of the first two words of this line: *ambieras censor*. Arguments were adduced above for linking this verse with the previous one (62: *vivere cum speras viginti mundus in annis*). Here *cum* is evidently causal:²⁰ this line's 'hope to live *mundus*' accordingly furnishes the reason for the prefect's 'ambitiousness' (*ambieras*) in the next verse to undergo the *taurobolium*.²¹ The same confident

¹⁵ Cf. ThIL II 70, 59–72, 43 (s. v. *anima*, III: 'vita').

¹⁶ Whereas Cameron rightly takes exception to the phrase 'to kill the life of better people', a reference in connection with the *taurobolium* to 'sacrificing a better life' is unexceptionable.

¹⁷ The identical *meliores* occupies the initial position in both phrases, where it also precedes the direct object to which it is attached. On the Carmen's afore-mentioned use of synonyms for the two other terms cf. Ihm (n. 10; 'Epigramme ...'), 194, who speaks of the tendency to employ „vielfach ähnlich klingende Worte an Stelle der vergilischen“. The emendation of *caedere* to *laedere* by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Anthologia Latina*, I, 1, Stuttgart 1982, 20, may accordingly be dismissed.

¹⁸ So J. Henry, *Aeneidea*, 2, Dublin 1878, 121 (ad loc.).

¹⁹ *meliores* was evidently changed to *meliorum* by a scribe who knew his Virgil less well than the Carmen's intended audience and accordingly failed to recognize the allusion. Restoration of *meliores* and the contingent perception that this line too refers to the *taurobolium* invests the whole passage with a unity which has hitherto been lacking; it also provides *hinc* in the next line (64: *hinc tua confisus possent quod facta latere*) with a suitable antecedent.

²⁰ For 'cum causale' with the indicative in late Latin cf. J. B. Hofmann - A. Szantyr, *Lateinische Syntax und Stilistik*, Munich 1965 (Handb. d. Altertumswiss. 2, 2, 2), 624f. (no. 336).

²¹ At the same time N. McLynn, *The Fourth-Century taurobolium*, Phoenix 50 (1996), 318 and 325, refers to both Prudentius, *perist.* 10, 1048 ("he shows the ceremony culminating in that most characteristic fourth-century publicity device, an acclamation") and to the mention of the *taurobolium* on Praetextatus' epitaph (CIL 6, 1, no. 1778, 6; "the practice again indicates the unusually high public profile of the rite"); hence *ambire* with its connotation of 'ambition' is a particularly appropriate term. On the same grounds Buecheler's explanation of *ambieras* as 'tentaras' (ap. Riese [n. 8], 22) is unlikely to be correct. For *ambire* with the infinitive cf. ThIL I 1850, 74–84: since this usage is common in late Latin, the assumption of a debt here to Prudentius, c. *Symm.* 1, 556f. (so A. Bartalucci, *Il carne del cod. Paris. 8084 e i problemi della trasmissione antica delle opere di Prudenzio*, Stud. Class. Orient. 10 [1961], 175) is unwarranted.

expectation of ‘moral purity’²² also accounts for the epithet *ensor*, which is here employed with its well-established figurative meaning to denote a sense of ethical superiority.²³ The self-righteousness conveyed by this term is then debunked by the immediately adjacent use of *melior* to describe the bull: the author of the Carmen thereby achieves a devastating juxtaposition which does credit to his literary sensibility and sadistic flair.

²² For the use of *mundus* with specific reference to morality cf. ThL VIII 1632, 9–70.

²³ Cf. ThL III 801, 24–67 (‘II: translate i. q. reprehensor, castigator, corrector, criticus, iudex’); lines 63f. adduce the present verse of the Carmen, where *ensor* accordingly forms an ironic contrast to the next line of the poem (*hinc tua confisus possent quod facta latere*). Cameron (n. 2) points out that “neither Flavian nor anybody else was really a *ensor*”.

