

The Political Candidate in the Fifth Satire of Persius, lines 176-179: A Slave to Ambition or to Foreign Religion?

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The fifth satire of Persius Flaccus is devoted to the theme that no man is truly free unless he has mastered the principles of stoicism. All men are enslaved morally by forces that overpower them, such as greed (lines 132-142), luxury (142-156), love (161-175), and superstitious religion (179-188). Nearly all commentators since John Conington¹ believe that lines 176-179 refer to another type of moral enslavement: slavery to ambition. The lines read as follows:

Ius habet ille sui palpo, quem ducit hiantem
Cretata ambitio? Vigila et cicer ingere large
Rixanti populo, nostra ut Floralia possint
Aprici meminisse senes. Quid pulchrius?

Does he truly own himself, the flatterer, whom chalk-white Ambition leads, open-mouthed? Get up before dawn, and deal out showers of chickpeas for the scrambling people, so that old men, sunning themselves, may make mention of our Floralia. What is more beautiful?

The image of Ambition *leading* the politician has led scholars to believe that this passage treats the slave to Ambition, who is forced by his mistress to rise early in order to campaign by throwing chickpeas at the masses during the Floralia festival.² But this

¹ J. Conington, *The Satires of A. Persius Flaccus*, Oxford 1872.

² Conington, p. 112, commentary to line 176; B.L. Gildersleeve, *The Satires of A. Persius Flaccus*, New York 1875, p. 183, commentary to lines 176-179, and p. 184, commentary to line 179; F. Villeneuve, *A. Persi Flacci Saturarum Liber*, Paris 1918, p. 152, commentary to lines 176-188; R.A. Harvey, *A Commentary on Persius*, Leiden 1981, p. 174, and commentary to lines 176-179, pp. 175-6; W. Kissel, *Aulus Persius Flaccus. Satiren* (Wissenschaftliche Kommentare zu griechischen und lateinischen Schriftstellern), Heidelberg 1990, pp. 737-8, commentary to lines 176-179, *inter alia*.

This suggestion has been bolstered by the proposal of Franz Bücheler, adopted by the Oxford Latin Dictionary, s.v. *palpus*, to remove the comma after *palpo* in line 176, and take the word not as the subject of the passage, the flattering politician (*palpo*, *palponis* in the sense of 'flatterer' is not attested elsewhere), but as the ablative of *palpus* or *palpum* ('the soft palm of the hand', and by extension, 'flattery', a usage attested in Plautus), modifying *ducit*. According to this reading, *Ambitio* leads the politician *palpo*, 'with flattery', and *hiantem*, 'open-mouthed'. Kissel, p. 739, cites three reasons for preferring this reading: (a) if the politician is being satirized as a passive slave, he should not be the flatterer; (b) *palpo* nominative as subject of the sentence makes *ille* redundant and the sentence wordy; (c) the meter suggests a syntactical pause before *palpo*. Arguments (b) and (c) seem cogent, but if *palpo* nominative is read as standing in apposition to *ille*, a pause beforehand is not out of

interpretation is problematic. Note that according to this interpretation, Ambition is treated in a mere four lines, while the other examples are given 9-14 lines each. Moreover, the description of the politician as a slave to ambition is not analogous to the other examples of slavery, because the desire to hold office is a quality intrinsic to the politician himself, with which he identifies wholeheartedly. Unlike those possessed by greed, luxury or love, and unlike genuine devotees of superstitious foreign religions, the candidate for office is very much in control of himself and others. Only by abstracting Ambition and personalizing it does Persius turn the politician into a slave. But one can hardly abstract Ambition and divorce it from the ambitious person, as Persius does with Greed, Luxury or Love. The hypostases of greed, luxury, and love are appropriate: the greedy person may desire possessions, but he does not want to *be* greedy, and he is not oblivious to the price he pays for his greed; hence the notion that *Avaritia* enslaves him by leading him to undertake risky and uncomfortable ventures is apt. The person lulled into inaction by luxury, against his own economic interests, is indeed a slave to *Luxuria*. By contrast, the candidate for office is interested in the office, and his cynical use of a religious festival in order to bribe the populace is indicative of the control he has over both himself and others. While the candidate may very well deny that he is making cynical use of a festival for his own personal gain, he would be the last to dissociate his desire for office from himself, and declare himself a slave to or victim of an abstract *Ambitio*.³

R.H. Harvey and others argue that the words *Vigila et cicer ingere large rixanti populo* are the key to understanding the slavery here: the politician himself would rather sleep late, but *Ambitio* forces him to rise early in order to bribe the voters at the Floralia.⁴ If so, the argument is weak: *Ambitio* does not enslave the politician by imposing upon him from the outside a desire for burdensome office or the like; that desire is

the question (cf. our English translation, with comma before 'the flatterer'), and both issues are resolved.

However, the ultimate question is that of content, and *palpo* ablative makes little sense: Harvey, p. 175, commentary to line 176, who reluctantly adopts this reading, admits that 'it is not easy to see why *Ambitio* should flatter her slave'. Moreover, as we shall see below, there is ample evidence that the politician is not being satirized as a slave, but as a shrewd manipulator who is a secret devotee of Judaism, and therefore it is more likely that it is he who is being characterized as the flatterer.

³ Perhaps in anticipation of this question, Conington insists that *Ambitio* here is "the goddess of canvassing", not to be rendered *ambition*, though elsewhere the Latin word is nearly equivalent to the English' (p. 112, commentary to line 177). But this only exacerbates the problem: if every pursuit in the classical world has a god or goddess associated with it, then even the most independent of men is a slave! Cf. the ambivalence of Villeneuve, p. 153, commentary to line 177, on this matter.

⁴ See Harvey, p. 175, commentary to lines 177-179, and citations there from earlier scholars. Indeed, the passage seems to echo lines 132-142, in which *Avaritia* is said to force her slave to rise early in order to undertake a perilous and uncomfortable journey. But in that instance the command to rise early is explicitly attributed to *Avaritia*, and the sleeping merchant tries to resist. Moreover, early rising is only the first of many forms of servitude demanded by *Avaritia* against the better interests of the 'slave'. By contrast, there is no indication here that the politician would prefer to sleep late, and in context it would seem that early rising is in fact a sign that the politician *is* his own master: it is a small price to pay for office, and it is an indication of self-control in pursuit of a goal.

intrinsic to his personality, and therefore in no way burdensome. *Ambitio* merely forces him to wake up early during the campaign. Is this truly slavery for a man who aspires to public office?

Conington himself attributes the words *Vigila et cicer ingere large rixanti populo, nostra ut Floralia possint aprici meminisse senes* to Persius, not to *Ambitio*, and explains as follows: “‘Is the political aspirant free? If so, take all the necessary steps to gratify your ambition’, these being described in such a manner as to show that they are really the badges of servitude”.⁵ However, the description in no way indicates that the steps necessary to gratify ambition are badges of servitude: throwing chickpeas to the masses and watching them scramble is a (rather sordid) badge of *mastery*, not of servitude. The ‘badges of servitude’ here are clearly those of the people scrambling for chickpeas, who make themselves even more abject by deeming the demeaning experience one of the most memorable of their lives, to be recalled when they are enjoying their retirement. These badges of servitude worn by the *masses* only serve to highlight the self-control and control over others exhibited by the candidate. The only possible ‘badge of servitude’ worn by the candidate is, once again, the fact that he must wake up early, but, as stated above, waking up early in order to manipulate others is hardly servitude for a naturally ambitious candidate. Moreover, as Harvey has pointed out, Conington’s roundabout description is itself indicative of the difficulty with this interpretation. Is the political aspirant free? Unlike in the other sections of the satire, in which the answer is a resounding ‘No’; the answer here is ‘If so ...’.⁶ Only by implication is the candidate’s lack of freedom said to become apparent, and, as we have seen, this implication is very hard to discern.

Conington does seem to be correct in attributing the words *Vigila et cicer ingere large rixanti populo, nostra ut Floralia possint aprici meminisse senes* to Persius himself, and not to *Ambitio*, if only because elsewhere in the Satire changes of voice are explicit.⁷ But the force of the statement is not to attribute to the politician badges of servitude. If any opprobrium is suggested by the description of his manipulative behavior and his irreverence for the festival, it is that of excessive⁸ and obnoxious mastery, which not only is not the theme of this satire, but undermines the message that all men are enslaved morally.

A further crux, whether we assume that the speaker in these lines is Persius himself or *Ambitio*, is the use of the pronoun *nostra* with *Floralia*. The *Floralia* is the festival of all Romans: what is the force of *nostra* here? Conington, who asserts that Persius is the speaker, says that Persius momentarily identifies with the politician.⁹ This is a difficult notion altogether in satire, and one which would seem to indicate that the politician is not being satirized, as are the other people described as ‘enslaved’. B.L. Gildersleeve calls

⁵ Conington, p. 112, commentary to line 176.

⁶ Harvey, p. 176, commentary to lines 177-179.

⁷ See, e.g., note 4 above.

⁸ This is the force of *hiantem*, ‘open-mouthed’. The candidate’s ambition is excessive and obnoxious to Persius, though not to the candidate himself.

⁹ Conington, p. 112, commentary to line 178.

the usage 'ironical',¹⁰ but the force of the irony is unclear. Harvey, who believes that *Ambitio* is speaking, explains that *nostra* refers to *Ambitio* and the politician.¹¹ But this interpretation only serves to reinforce the notion that *Ambitio* is an innate aspect of the politician's personality, and not his mistress. At any rate, both of these interpretations have the effect of identifying the *Floralia* as the *candidate's* festival, to be used by him for his own ends, and not that of the populace, who are being manipulated. By any account this weakens the satire, if the intended effect is to present the candidate as a pawn of *Ambitio*.

Indeed, the very fact that *Ambitio* is said to be *cretata*, 'chalk-white', or robed in the robes of the candidate, indicates that *Ambitio* here is to be identified with the candidate. Harvey explains that 'the adjective, which is transferred from the person subject to *Ambitio*, refers to the customary wearing of a white toga by political aspirants ...'.¹² If in fact the candidate is enslaved by *Ambitio*, it hardly makes sense to attribute to *Ambitio* the garb of the slave, the very symbol of this servitude!

What is the force of *Quid pulchrius?*, 'What is more beautiful?', at the end of the passage? If in fact ambition is being ridiculed here by Persius as another form of slavery, the line ought to be understood ironically. But the force of the satire, as understood by Conington and most others, is so weak that the reader is baffled by the relevance of the question. The behavior of the politician is unbeautiful because it is 'enslaves' others in a distasteful manner, not because the politician himself is a slave to *Ambitio*. Conington therefore ignores the line, while Gildersleeve is forced to see it as 'a snatch of the old men's chat':¹³ the old men sunning themselves presumably recall the *Floralia* of that particular year with the words *Quid pulchrius?*

Harvey sees the question as a transition to the next passage, which treats the slave to foreign superstitious religions, the first of which is Judaism: 'P[ersius] deals with slavery to the unreasoning fear aroused by superstitious beliefs. The transition pivots on the sarcastic *quid pulchrius?* (179), i.e. *quid peius*: a worse form of slavery than political ambition is superstition'.¹⁴ However, even a cursory glance at the next passage will indicate a major problem with this explanation, and indeed with any explanation that seeks to treat lines 176-179 as a separate form of slavery, slavery to ambition. The next passage, lines 179-184, which clearly treats the slave of the Jewish religion, opens with the conjunction *at*, 'but, however'. It reads as follows:

At cum
Herodis venere dies unctasque fenestra
Dispositae pinguem nebulam vomuere lucernae
Portantes violas rubrumque amplexa catinum

¹⁰ Gildersleeve, p. 184, commentary to line 178; he refers to Satire III, line 3, in his commentary to which he calls a similar usage 'ironical first person, excluding the speaker' (p. 121).

¹¹ Harvey, p. 176, commentary to line 178.

¹² Harvey, p. 175, commentary to line 177. Villeneuve, p. 153, commentary to line 177, explains that *Ambitio* is 'la "brigue"' (the goddess of canvassing, see above, n. 3), and therefore dresses in the candidate's garb.

¹³ Gildersleeve, p. 184, commentary to line 179. He is followed by Kissel, pp. 740-2, commentary to lines 177-179, who cites other explanations there on pp. 740-1.

¹⁴ Harvey, p. 176, commentary to lines 179-188.

Cauda natat thynni, tumet alba fidelia vino,
Labra moves tacitus recutitaque sabbata palles.

But when the Days of Herod arrive, and lamps bearing violets are placed on the greasy windowsills, spewing out heavy clouds of smoke, and when the tuna's tail swims around, encircling the red dish, and the white jar is bloated with wine, you move your lips in silence, turning pale at the Sabbath of the circumcised.

Scholars who maintain that lines 176-179 treat the slave of ambition are forced to ignore the word *at* at the beginning of this passage, which is 'never merely copulative *and*'.¹⁵ And the presence of *any* conjunction would seem to make Harvey's explanation, according to which *At cum Herodis venere Dies ...* is the answer to the question *Quid pulchrius?* which immediately precedes it, untenable. One cannot answer such a question with a passage beginning with a conjunction of any sort, much less one with disjunctive or contrasting force.¹⁶

The only interpretation consistent with the evidence is that proposed by Otto Jahn: *hic de superstitionis tractat ostendens etiam qui superstitionibus sit deditus, servire*.¹⁷ Jahn treats lines 176-184 as a single passage, referring to a Roman politician who manipulates the masses by means of Roman religious festivities, but who is himself enslaved by his belief in the Jewish religion. He is a slave not to *Ambitio*, but to the Jewish God. 'Does he truly own himself, the flatterer, whom chalk-white Ambition leads, open-mouthed? Get up before dawn, and deal out showers of chickpeas for the scrambling people, so that old men, sunning themselves, may make mention of our Floralia. What is more beautiful?' (lines 176-179). No one seems more his own master than the ambitious politician, master of himself as well as of the people. Driven by ambition, he rises early in order to turn Flora's sacred festival into an opportunity for self-promotion and self-aggrandizement, and he has the crowds scrambling at his feet in abject servitude. Ostensibly, what can be a more beautiful specimen of the man in control of himself? But follow him home, and you will learn the truth: 'But when the Days of Herod arrive, and lamps bearing violets are placed on the greasy windowsills, spewing out heavy clouds of smoke, and when the tuna's tail swims around, encircling the red dish, and the white jar is bloated with wine, you move your lips in silence, turning pale at the Sabbath of the circumcised'. Even the ambitious leader who manipulates Roman religion to his own ends is awestruck by something, in this case the God of the Jewish religion.

¹⁵ C.T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford 1879, s.v. *at* I, p. 186, col. 1. Gildersleeve, p. 184, commentary to line 179, admits that the transition is 'abrupt'. Villeneuve can make sense of the passage only by supplying: '... What can be more beautiful? But [slavery to passion can not always itself invoke beautiful appearance, because] when the Days of Herod arrive ...'.

¹⁶ See Kissel, p. 741, n. 351. It may perhaps be argued that the force of *Quid pulchrius* is 'How can you possibly top this example of slavery to a vice', to which the response is *At cum Herodis venere dies ...*, 'But just wait until the days of Herod arrive, and you yourself tremble before the Jewish God, presenting us with a better example'. However, this explanation places a heavy burden on the force of *at*, and the interpretive power of the reader.

¹⁷ A. Persii Flacci, D. Iunii Iuvenalis, Sulpiciae, *Saturae*, recognovit Otto Jahn, Berlin 1886, p. 46, note to line 180. See also scholarship cited by Kissel, p. 741, n. 351, q.v.

Conington rejects this interpretation with the following statement: 'Jahn supposes the meaning to be that the successful political aspirant, apparently free, is really a slave to superstition; but it is evident that Persius means to mark two kinds of slavery, not one only'.¹⁸ Most subsequent scholarship has followed Conington, but as we have seen, this interpretation is not at all 'evident'; in fact, it ignores the evidence at hand.

Jahn's interpretation consists entirely of the sentence cited above. Despite its brevity, this interpretation enables resolution of all of the outstanding issues cited. The candidate's ego is indeed 'led' by ambition, but this is not meant to indicate that he is a slave to an external force; the usage is the same as ours when we say someone is 'driven' by ambition. The political candidate is cited by Persius as someone who would seem to contradict his thesis that all men are enslaved. He appears to be an unconflicted, single-minded master of himself and others, and his mastery is not only native to him, it is his essence. His ambition wears white, as does he: they are one and the same.

There is no need to attribute the words *Vigila et cicer ingere large rixanti populo, nostra ut Floralia possint aprici meminisse senes* to anyone other than Persius himself. Persius is merely using the imperative to describe the well-disciplined candidate, rising early in order to satisfy his ambition: Is he the master of himself, the politician who is driven by ambition? Rise up early and manipulate the masses! What is a more beautiful example of a self-possessed man? The answer is a resounding *At*, 'But': But even such a man, who can exploit *nostra Floralia* so cynically and so masterfully, is a craven worshipper of an external force. Turn the corner and you will see him reciting a Jewish prayer in all sincerity.

Nostra Floralia is indeed the Floralia of all the Romans; it is contrasted here with *recutita sabbata*.¹⁹ The political candidate may cynically exploit our Roman festival, *nostra Floralia*, but he himself is terror stricken at the Days of Herod,²⁰ the 'circumcised Sabbath' of the Jews.

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¹⁸ Conington, p. 112, commentary to line 179.

¹⁹ This may be the reason that *recutita sabbata*, a syntagma which formally echoes *nostra Floralia*, is used here for *sabbata recutorum*.

²⁰ Elsewhere I have argued in favor of the view of J. Derenbourg, *Essai sur l'histoire et la géographie de la Palestine d'après les Thalmuds et les autres sources rabbiniques*, Paris 1867, p. 165, n. 1, and S. Krauss, 'La fête de Hanoucca', *Revue des études juives* 30 (1895), 35-7, that the reference is to the festival of Hanukkah. See my article 'Herod and Hanukkah' [Hebrew], *Zion* 68 (2003), 5-40.