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Eumolpus and the Dead Rat: Good Grattius Hunting

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“Outside a python, a dead rat is nothing special to look at. Inside, though, it exerts a horrifying fascination.”¹

So begins Catherine Connors’ nuanced chapter on the *Bellum Civile* in her detailed study of *Petronius the Poet*. Had Eumolpus’s poem survived separately from the *Satyricon*, no doubt it would now be confined to the decent obscurity of the various editions of *Minor Latin Poets*. Instead, as the longest stretch of verse within a larger prose frame, it occupies a central role in discussions of both genre and characterization in Petronius.

The question of how good (or how bad) a poet Eumolpus is remains controversial.² His poems seem technically competent and are thus orders of magnitude better than the work of a versifier such as Trimalchio; these are no broad caricatures, so the crowd in the picture gallery that responds to his *Trojae Halosis* by throwing stones at him seems a bit excessive.³

Yet questions of taste and quality remain, especially about his *Bellum Civile* (*Sat.* 119-124). Because this sketch for an epic poem spends so much of its time on divine machinery, the temptation in hindsight has been strong to read it as a response to Lucan’s choice in the *Pharsalia* to dispense with the traditional epic apparatus of gods. My present purpose is not to revisit the question of whether Eumolpus’s poem specifically parodies or responds to Lucan. Rather, I want to see what else might be in the poem’s digestive tract and call attention specifically to some allusions to the Augustan poet Grattius. Before autopsying the *Bellum Civile*, however, I will examine some allusions to Grattius of perhaps even more significance in Eumolpus’s “theoretical” statements about poetry and the arts.

We would not know Grattius was an Augustan, were it not for one direct reference to him in Ovid’s *Epistulae ex Ponto*.⁴ What remains of his

¹ Connors 1998. 100.

² George 1974. 119 still seems apt: “The *B.C.* is bad poetry, but the intensity of its badness is not as great as one would expect in pure parody.”

³ 90. 1: *ex is, qui in porticibus spatiabantur, lapides in Eumolpum recitantem miserunt.*

⁴ In a list of contemporary poets at Rome, 4. 16. 34: *aptaque venanti Grattius arma daret*, a verse which may echo Grattius 23, *arma dabo et venandi persequar artis* (so Curcio 1898. 56). Grattius is the only identifiable didactic poet in Ovid’s list (Mayer 1982. 305-306).

poem “On Hunting,” the *Cynegetica*, are some 540 lines, probably most of Book I, though we cannot guess at the poem’s original length. The subject, with its lists of hunting dogs and equipment, is not one to grip a wide audience today, at least not according to John Henderson who begins his recent essay on Grattius thus: “It’s no use. There is no hope, not a dog’s chance. Whatever I write in this essay, who will go root out Grattius’ poem . . . ?”⁵ No other Roman writer thought him worth naming, but his subject matter apparently appealed enough to a late antique and mediaeval leisure class to have saved this fragment. It is possible that allusions to Grattius in later major poets lie undetected, but where a few newly discovered allusions to Callimachus might earn a scholar tenure, Grattius draws blank stares.

Grattian allusions, even though previously undetected, might not merit more than a footnote, if they were simply scattered at random. Their placement in the *Satyricon* suggests more than passing parody, however, for two occur not in the poems themselves but in “theoretical” statements by the manic poet Eumolpus.

The first in our surviving text occurs during our initial encounter with Eumolpus in the picture gallery. After Giton deserts him, our narrator Encolpius is there contemplating the scenes of lovers, lamenting his loss, and talking to himself. Eumolpus enters and introduces himself as a poet (*‘ego’ inquit ‘poeta sum’* 83. 8). He proceeds to tell Encolpius the racy tale of the Pergamene Boy, in a fairly obvious attempt to pick Encolpius up. Encolpius then asks about some of the paintings, which evokes from Eumolpus a mini-lament for the decline of all the fine and liberal arts from their pristine state:

priscis enim temporibus, cum adhuc **nuda virtus** placeret, vigeabant artes ingenuae summumque certamen inter homines erat, ne quid profuturum saeculis diu lateret. (Sat. 88.2)

In days of old, when bare virtue was still popular, the liberal arts flourished and humanity’s greatest struggle was to leave nothing any longer hidden that would benefit future ages.

The phrase *nuda virtus* here is something of an oxymoron, “naked virtue,”⁶ and has added piquancy in its setting, given that some of the

⁵ Henderson 2001.1.

⁶ Most translators of Petronius shrink from a stark translation of *nuda*, either altering the structure to avoid an adjective noun combination (Heseltine: “virtue was still loved for her own sake”; Arrowsmith: “merit and achievement were honored for themselves”) or softening the sense a bit (Sullivan: “mere merit”; Branham: “mere excellence”). Only Ruden and Walsh opt for “Virtue unadorned.” Statius uses the phrase at *Thebaid* 4. 229 (reference from Formicola 1988 *ad loc.*), *nudaeque modos uirtutis*, and here both Mozley and Melville translate “naked valour.”

representations of mythological lovers that Eumolpus and Encolpius have been looking at were surely shown as scantily clad, if not actually nude.

Given the declamatory style here, we might look to rhetoric for similar topoi. Indeed, the collections of declamations attributed to Quintilian contain examples of the phrase, and while they cannot be closely dated, they need not be much later than the *Satyricon*. The third of the *Major Declamations*, a defense for a soldier accused of murdering a superior officer, employs the phrase:

quid enim verear, ne noceat reo humilitas apud te, cui vel gratior potest esse **nuda virtus** . . . ? (3.19)

Why should I fear that humble station might harm a defendant brought before you, to whom bare virtue can be even more pleasing?

“Bare virtue” or “bare courage” is of course an admirable attribute of a soldier, and the oration concludes by urging the general judging the case to allow the soldier to prove both his innocence and valor on the battlefield.⁷ The *Minor Declamations* provide another parallel with a more abstract sense. A (fictional) doctor arguing an inheritance case says:

aliis summum bonum voluptas habetur; quidam id in **nuda virtute** posuerunt . . . (268. 10)

Some hold pleasure to be the highest good; others have found it in bare virtue . . .

Michael Winterbottom suggests a contrast here between Epicurean and Stoic viewpoints,⁸ but the phrase need not be solely Stoic, nor is it confined to the rhetorical schools.

The phrase has a long afterlife in Roman poetry, from Statius (*Thebaid* 4. 229) down to Neo-Latin, turning up in the work of the Welsh Latin poet,

⁷ Sussman 1987. 36 translates *nuda virtus* here as “virtue devoid of wealth,” and there is in the context an appeal to the general’s own humble origins which might harmonize with this. Though fictional, the defense is of a historical soldier named Trebonius who killed C. Lusius, an officer in Marius’s army—who was related to Marius. See Valerius Maximus 6. 1. 12 and Plutarch, *Life of Marius* 14 for the story. Trebonius killed Lusius when the latter attempted a homosexual assault on him. In the context, then, *nuda virtus* may have associations other than lack of wealth, and I have translated accordingly.

⁸ Winterbottom 1984. 361 *ad loc.* He also cites Lucan 9. 594-595 (with reference to Cato) in support: *si successu nuda remoto / inspicitur virtus*. I am indebted to the kindness of Ruth Parkes for these original references.

John Owen, among others.⁹ When Eumolpus situates *nuda virtus* in past ages, however, he encourages us to look backward.¹⁰ The earliest source in Roman poetry for the phrase seems to be Grattius, who indeed places it quite early in the proem to his work:

Dona cano divom, laetas venantibus artis,
auspicio, Diana, tuo; prius omnis in armis
spes fuit et **nuda** silvas **virtute** movebant
inconsulti homines vitaeque erat error in omni.

(1-4)

I sing the gifts of the gods, the arts prosperous for hunters,
under your auspices, Diana; once the only hope lay in arms,
and unschooled men prowled the woods in bare manhood,
and all life was roaming.

Eumolpus's *priscis . . . temporibus* seems to allude to Grattius's *prius* (2) and thus strengthen the allusion in *nuda virtus*. Note also the play in levels of meaning. In Grattius *nuda virtus* may mean quite literally that man in his earliest nomadic state hunted in the nude.¹¹ When Eumolpus uses the phrase, it is on the surface metaphorical, but remember also those paintings in the gallery, some of which may have depicted *nuda virtus*.

The positioning of the phrase in Eumolpus is also key. It is deliberately placed at the beginning of a programmatic statement about the arts. Eumolpus proceeds to sketch a quick history of philosophy and art, moving from Democritus and Eudoxus to Apelles and Phidias. He then suddenly remarks that Encolpius is looking at a painting of the sack of Troy and claims to improvise on the spot a poem on that theme, 65 verses constituting his second-longest composition in the surviving *Satyricon*.¹² While Eumolpus's discussion of *artes ingenuae* here does not single out poetry *per se*, it is a theoretical statement about the arts, followed then by his own practice in poetic *ecphrasis*.

⁹ E.g., Epigram 67, *Nuda Veritas. In Alethum*:

Si posset virtus (inquit Plato) nuda videri,
Mirus in hanc hominum conciperetur amor.
Vidit apud Venetos (si credere fas sit) Alethus.
Virtutes nudas et vitavit eas.

Compare also Jan Dantyszczek, in whose *Epithalamium Sigismundi et Barbarae* we find:
Quid multis? Ille est, in quo sincera bonorum
Congeries, in quo Virtus sibi nuda paravit
Rite domicilium.

¹⁰ See Habermehl 2006. 131 *ad* 88.2 for *adhuc* pointing toward the past.

¹¹ This is not, however, the interpretation of Enk 1918 *ad loc.* who glosses the phrase "*virtute arte doloque carenti*."

¹² This need not be true improvisation, but a previously composed work which Eumolpus here finds an occasion to use: Slater 1990. 97; *contra* Courtney 2001. 140-141.

The next echo of Grattius also comes in a theoretical statement, when after the shipwreck and on the road to Croton Eumolpus offers a brief “*ars poetica*” just before he recites his longest poem, the *Bellum Civile*. Here his account strings together Homer, the lyricists, Vergil, and Horace as models of poetry. He announces his specific theme thus:

ecce belli civilis ingens **opus** quisquis **attigerit** nisi plenus litteris,
sub onere labetur.

(118. 6)

Note that anyone touching upon the great subject of the civil war, unless steeped in literature, will sink under the burden.

The phrase *plenus litteris*, “steeped in literature,” has been much discussed, for it seems to signal allusive practice in the poem which follows.¹³ What has not been much noted is the odd and blowsy phrase *opus . . . attigerit*.¹⁴ One expects a verb for “attempt” or “approach” here, as Eumolpus describes previous poets who have undertaken the theme of the civil war. Instead we get a verb meaning simply to “touch.” Why? I suggest again Grattius:

consule, Penei qualis perfunditur amne
Thessalus aut patriae quem conspexere Mycenae
glaucum: nempe ingens, nempe ardua fundet in auras
crura. quis Eleas potior lustravit harenas?
ne tamen hoc **attingat opus**: iactantior illi
virtus quam silvas durumque lacescere martem.

(501-506)

Consider what sort of Thessalian horse plunges into the stream of Peneus or the grey one Mycenae’s land looks upon. Huge he is, and high he tosses his legs in the air. What mightier steed has paced the course at Elis? But let him not touch this work: his strength is too impetuous for attacking the forests and hard fighting.

The phrase may have been clumsy enough on its own to catch Petronius’s ear, but we might also note that it occurs in close proximity to key Grattian

¹³ One might call this an Alexandrian footnote written with a sledgehammer. On the Alexandrian footnote (a seemingly general reference to tradition which nonetheless signals specific allusions to come), see Hinds 1998. 1-5; the term comes from David Ross.

¹⁴ For the verb, Stubbe 1933. 60 compares Catullus 22. 15, *poemata attigit*, but *poemata* is much more focussed.

terms such as *virtus*, *silva*, and *mars*. Once more Eumolpus shows himself to be a Grattian disciple in his poetic principles.

Finally, consider the beginning of the *Bellum Civile* itself. Eumolpus opens his poem with portentous spondees thus:

orbem iam totum victor Romanus habebat,
qua mare, qua terrae, qua sidus currit utrumque.
(119 vv. 1-2)

Now the conquering Roman held the whole world,
sea, land, and wherever sun and moon run their course.

The second line here, as Connors notes, is the one perhaps most often claimed as an allusion to Lucan.¹⁵ The line she had in mind comes from the first book of the *Pharsalia*:

dividitur ferro regnum, populique potentis,
quae mare, quae terras, quae totum possidet orbem,
non cepit fortuna duos.
(1. 109-111)

The tyrants' power was divided by the sword, and the wealth of
the imperial people, that possessed sea and land the whole world
over, was not enough for two.

(trans. J. D. Duff)

P. A. George has argued forcefully that both the *Bellum Civile* and Lucan are allusions or reactions to Vergilian precedent, rather than one Neronian parodying the other.¹⁶ Certainly *Aeneid* 1. 236 (*qui mare, qui terras omni dicione tenerent*) bears no small resemblance, and other parallels could be added.¹⁷

Yet Eumolpus's line has an even closer parallel in the Augustan Grattius:

ipse deus cultorque feri Tiryntius orbis,
quem mare, quem tellus, quem praeceps ianua Ditis

¹⁵ Connors 1998. 105-106; Collignon 1892. 151; cf. Courtney 2001. 185, who argues both that we can identify multiple parallels to Lucan and that we should not ask the question of what all these purported parallels mean.

¹⁶ George 1974. 123-124.

¹⁷ George cites also *Aen.* 7. 100 (*qua sol utrumque recurrens*, noted also by Collignon 1892. 165) and even better the *Catalepton* 9. 4 (. . . *qua terrae quaque patent maria*). Lucretius may lie in the background as well; Guido 1976. 82 notes the same triple anaphora in Lucretius 1. 278: *quae mare, quae terras, quae denique nubila caeli*.

omnia temptantem, qua laus erat obvia, passa¹⁸
hinc decus et famae primum impetravit honorem.
(69-72)

The god of Tiryns himself, civilizer of a savage world,
to whom sea and earth and the mighty gate of Dis
yielded at his every attempt, where praise lay open to him,
from here [i.e., the chase] won glory and the first honor of fame.

Connors concedes that in general Eumolpus offers “dim, overly studied transformations of tradition,”¹⁹ but nonetheless sees a fairly pointed reaction to Lucan in the second line of his *Bellum Civile*. Yet here is the same triple anaphora of the relative in Grattius, with the additional point that (unlike Lucan) the form of *orbs* employed by Eumolpus here falls in the preceding rather than the same line.²⁰

Moreover, the Eumolpan variation seems to have more point as an allusion to Grattius. Lucan’s series is “sea, land, world,” where the third element is a summation of the previous two. Eumolpus’s series is “sea, land, heavens,” while Grattius’s is “sea, land, Underworld.” Eumolpus’s poem with its loudly clanking divine machinery begins and ends on earth but includes an Underworld vision as well. It seems typically Eumolpan perversity then to launch this poem with its lengthy subterranean interlude by replacing the Grattian (and Vergilian²¹) door of Dis with a look up to the stars.²²

¹⁸ For omission of the main verb in this clause Horsfall 1989. 214 compares Vergil, *Georgics* 2. 1 and 4. 6. I prefer Sannazaro’s emendation *passa*, but see Formicola 1988 *ad loc.* for a defense of the ms. reading *passi*.

¹⁹ Connors 1998. 102.

²⁰ Given their relative poetic reputations today, it may be that few Lucan scholars will wish to see him as alluding to Grattius (though see n. 21, below). Yet there is no chronological problem whatsoever with Lucan alluding to Grattius, where a Petronian allusion to Lucan posits a rather tight timeline indeed—for a Neronian Petronius. Martin 2000 has expanded on his earlier argument (Martin 1976) for a Flavian Petronius, perhaps as late as 120, while Ripoll 2002 would opt for an early Flavian Petronius (circa 85). While neither of these arguments is strictly relevant to Grattian allusion in Petronius, Ripoll’s excellent principle that a parody should be recognizable as such “*sans confusion possible*” (Ripoll 2002. 164), with which he undermines Martin’s notion of parody of Silius Italicus in Petronius, is precisely the problem with the proposed parallels in Eumolpus’s poem to Lucan.

²¹ *Aen.* 6. 127: *noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Ditis*. Lucretius 1. 1112, *ianua Leti*, may also lie behind it (see Enk 1918 *ad loc.*). Formicola 1988 *ad loc.* notes the originality of Grattius’s transferred epithet *praeceps* and suggests that Grattius in turn may have influenced Lucan 5. 640: *praeceps mare*.

²² Eumolpus’s *sidus currit utrumque* may echo Senecan tragic usage, as in *Thyestes* 698-699, *e laevo aethere / atrum cucurrit litem sidus trahens*; see Guido 1976. 83-84.

Note then the return of the repressed in Petronius. Father Dis himself arises from his Underworld abode in the *Bellum Civile*, and his long speech predicting war is introduced thus:

has inter sedes Ditis pater extulit ora
bustorum flammis et cana sparsa favilla,
ac tali volucrem Fortunam voce lacessit:²³

(*Sat.* 120 vv. 76-78)

Amidst these seats of Dis the father²⁴ raised his countenance,
wreathed with flames of pyres and grey ash,
and savaged flying Fortune with these words:

In Grattius the world of humans invades the Underworld; in Eumolpus, the Underworld erupts from below into our world.

Note too the actor in Grattius: the conquering “god of Tiryns” is Hercules. His labors in general spread over land and sea, but “the mighty gate of Dis” points us to his visit to the Underworld to bring back Cerberus. In Eumolpus’s poem Dis comes to the earth, while Hercules is replaced explicitly by Julius Caesar. The first human action in the *Bellum Civile* after the epiphany of Dis begins with Caesar’s descent from the Alps:

alpibus aeriis, ubi Graio numine pulsae
descendunt rupes et se patiuntur adiri,
est locus Herculeis aris sacer.

(*Sat.* 122 vv. 144-146)

In the lofty Alps, where the cliffs battered by Greek divinity
slope down and open themselves out to approach,
there is a place, sacred to the altars of Hercules.

Subtlety is not Eumolpus’s strong point: he gives us both *Graio numine* and *Herculeis aris* to be absolutely sure we see Caesar’s descent from the Alps as a second coming of Hercules into Italy. Thus the principal human action in Eumolpus’s poem is a reenactment of the Italian expedition of Hercules, antecedent of the triple relative in the line in Grattius that most resembles the second line in Eumolpus’s own effort. The connection to Grattius

²³ The line ending here is one of many Vergilian allusions in Eumolpus: *inritatque virum telis et voce lacessit* (*Aen.* 10. 644).

²⁴ Almost no translator resists the impulse to improve Eumolpus’s clumsy phrasing here. *Ditis* is a genitive dependent on *sedes*, but he is also the father in this line: Heseltine, Sullivan, Arrowsmith, and Ruden all translate “father Dis” while Kinney and Branham opt for simply “Hades.”

suddenly seems much stronger than any possible allusion to Lucan, or Vergil himself for that matter.²⁵

The editors of Grattius in the Loeb characterize him as a rather old-fashioned poet, fond of alliteration, *hapax legomena*, and archaic turns of phrase. He seems the sort of figure Eumolpus would admire, given the latter's laments over the fallen state of poetry in his own day. Grattius's poem could have originally comprised a number of books, and allusions to lost lines of that work might now lurk undetected elsewhere in Eumolpus's compositions. We shall never know.

Enough remains, however, to show that Petronius certainly knew the work of the Augustan Grattius. Grattius may not be the worst surviving poet of ancient Rome, *pace* Nicholas Horsfall, but in the period at Rome in which the canon of the Augustan golden age was taking shape²⁶ and the new Neronian poets labored under the anxiety of its influence, few will have felt the weight of the shade of Grattius. The allusions to distinctive Grattian turns of phrase in Eumolpus's theoretical musings and at key moments in his *Bellum Civile* form a small but significant part of his characterization as an old-fashioned and decidedly mediocre practitioner of poetry.

²⁵ Though note a Vergilian allusion here in *est locus*. The phrase twice opens a line in Eumolpus (here and v. 67, at the beginning of the narrative of the appearance of Dis) and recalls Vergil's *Aeneid* 1. 530 (*est locus, Hesperiam Grai cognomine dicunt*), repeated at 3. 163, but also 7. 563 (*est locus Italiae medio sub montibus altis*), referring to the entrance to the underworld.

²⁶ Mayer 1982.

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