



**The Echo of a Chaste Obscenity: Verg. E.VI.26 and Symm. EP.VI.22.1**

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THE ECHO OF A CHASTE OBSCENITY:  
VERG. *E.* VI.26 AND SYMM. *EP.* VI.22.1

No name is more closely connected with the support and cultivation of Latin letters in the fourth century than that of Symmachus. Drawing on the learning evident in the correspondence and *Relationes*, Symmachus' defense of the altar of Victory, his (idealized) presence in Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, and the hints given by the famous subscriptions to Livy, students of late antique culture have portrayed Symmachus (and his "circle") as the last bulwark of the pagan literary tradition.<sup>1</sup> There is reason to think, however, that such portraits may be rather overdrawn;<sup>2</sup> and in all of them Symmachus certainly wears a face too unrelievedly grim. I would like, in this note, to draw attention to a different, more casual use that Symmachus makes of his learning, involving a reminiscence of Vergil which has gone unremarked.

In *Ep.* VI.22.1 f., Symmachus writes to his (daughter and) son-in-law, Nicomachus Flavianus, concerning a lawsuit which has been stirred up against the latter:

dura commotio est, quam gignit iniuria, sed mollire debet dolorem medicina patientiae. nec deest vobis usus adversa tolerandi, nam crebro ictum fortunae ferre didicistis. quod si in secundis rebus ageretis, iure insolitis malis felicitas laederetur. haec eo scribo, ut miratum me scias, quod constantiam tuam lis privata mutaverit, quam sub adfinium nomine . . . Baiani litoris persultator animavit. sed illi aliud mercedis erit. causae autem vestrae propugnaculum iudiciale non deficit. . . .

<sup>1</sup> On the literary reminiscences in Symmachus' works, W. Kroll, *De Q. Aurelii Symmachi studiis Graecis et Latinis* (Diss. Breslau 1891). For estimates of Symmachus' place in the literary and religious culture of the late fourth century, see (among more recent studies) H. Bloch, "The Pagan Revival in the West at the End of the Fourth Century," in A. Momigliano (ed.), *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford 1963) 207 ff.; F. Klingner, *Römische Geisteswelt*<sup>4</sup> (Munich 1961) 528 ff.; F. Paschoud, *Roma Aeterna* (1967) 100 ff.; R. Klein, *Symmachus: Eine tragische Gestalt des ausgehenden Heidentums* (Darmstadt 1971) 67 ff.; R. W. Markus, "Paganism, Christianity and the Latin Classics in the Fourth Century," in J. W. Binns (ed.), *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century* (London 1974) 1 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See esp., on the "pagan revival," Alan Cameron, "Paganism and Literature in Late Fourth Century Rome," in M. Fuhrmann (ed.), *Christianisme et formes littéraires de l'antiquité tardive en occident*, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 23 (Geneva 1977) 1 ff.; on the subscriptions, J. E. G. Zetzel, "The Subscriptions in the Manuscripts of Livy and Fronto and the Meaning of *Emendatio*," *CP* 75 (1980) 38 ff.

Writing in 395,<sup>3</sup> Symmachus alludes (*usus adversa tolerandi / ictum fortunae ferre didicistis*) to the disasters that had befallen the family of Flavianus in the preceding year and urges his son-in-law to show the same *constantia* in dealing with this private matter that he had previously displayed in facing his family's public misfortunes. Symmachus then dismisses the troublemaker with a flick (note the striking and contemptuous phrase, *Baiani litoris persultator*: "that fellow who prances about on the shore at Baiae") and goes on to give encouraging news of the suit.

The point of interest is the clause that Symmachus uses—*sed illi aliud mercedis erit*—when he touches on Flavianus' tormentor. The last three words should really be set in quotation marks (*sed illi "aliud mercedis erit"*), for the clause is an unmistakable borrowing from Vergil (*E. VI.25–26*), Silenus' promise to the meddling nymph Aegle:

"carmina quae vultis cognoscite: carmina vobis,  
huic aliud mercedis erit." simul incipit ipse. . . .

As well-bred schoolboys were regularly told when they came to those lines, that clause was Vergil's modest way of having Silenus threaten with *stuprum* the nymph who had instigated his binding.<sup>4</sup> Plainly Symmachus had not forgotten the lesson,<sup>5</sup> and he evidently turned it to his advantage when he came to think of the meddling instigator of Flavianus' suit. What better way for a gentleman to threaten an enemy ("But he'll get *his*") while maintaining the proper tone of voice?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> O. Seeck, *Aurelii Symmachi quae supersunt, MGH, Auctorum Antiquissimorum VI.1* (Berlin 1883) clxii.

<sup>4</sup> See Servius ad *E. VI.26*, HVIC ALIVD MERCEDIS ERIT nymphae minatur stuprum latenter: quod verecunde dixit Vergilius. For Vergil's restraint, contrasted with the greater frankness of Theocritus, see also Servius ad *E. II.51*, III.8 (similarly ad *G. III.135* [contrasted with Lucretius], ad *A. IX.801* [contrasted with Homer]).

<sup>5</sup> As he of course remembered other bits of scholastic lore: with *Ep. III.44.2* (a critique of "archaism": an si nobis scribenda sit forensis oratio, Iovem deosque ceteros Catonis lege praefabimur, ne nobis vitio detur vel neglegentia antiquitatis vel inscitia? atqui praestat Tullium sequi, qui ignorata maioribus usurpat exordia), compare Servius ad *A. VII.259* (DI NOSTRA INCEPTA SECVNDENT antiquo more locuturus de publicis rebus . . . facit ante deorum commemorationem, sicut etiam in omnibus Catonis orationibus legimus) and *XI.301* (PRAEFATVS DIVOS more antiquo: nam maiores nullam orationem nisi invocatis numinibus inchoabant, sicut sunt omnes orationes Catonis et Gracchi . . . unde Cicero per inrisionem ait [*div. Caec. 43*] "si quid ex vetere aliqua oratione Iovem ego optimum maximum . . .").

<sup>6</sup> The reminiscence is clinched by *aliud*, opposed to *carmina* in *E. VI.26* but without a corresponding antithesis in Symmachus' passage, where it is motivated solely

No doubt the equally well-bred Flavianus caught his father-in-law's risqué allusion and derived an extra frisson of satisfaction from the recollection of the Vergilian context. We see here another use to which a classical education might be put, as Vergil's *verecundia* provides a way of expressing refined abuse; and it is probably worth bearing the turn of phrase in mind when our image of Symmachus becomes a shade too solemn.

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by the Vergilian antecedent. My thanks to Robert Renehan and the referee of *AJP* for pointing this out and for other helpful remarks.