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**A CRUX IN THE PROEM OF HENRY OF AVRANCHES’
BORDO-SILER (R 129–144,17–18)**

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Abstract: The 13th-century poet Henry of Avranches has given us in the form of his *Bordo-Siler* what is a *chef-d’oeuvre* of poetic vituperation. The proem of this important poem is marred by textual corruption in the view of its editor and commentator, A. G. Rigg. The present article endeavours to show that the text is sound. Here we in fact have a reference to the parable of the Prodigal Son. We also have a clever *jeu grammatical* in the matter of metrical quantity.

Keywords: *Bordo-Siler*, Henry of Avranches, metrics, Parable of the Prodigal Son.

“I am the best poet in the world”. Thus Henry of Avranches to the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II¹. This “primo poet on the planet” has very recently been the subject of a substantial monograph by Elsa Marguin-Hamon². Marguin-Hamon deals in some detail with the proem of Henry’s poem against John Bordo and Peter Siler (“*Bordo-Siler*”; R 129–144), which is a *tour de force* of vilification; however Marguin-Hamon’s treatment breaks off with line 12³. Just five lines later comes the passage that is now at issue (ll. 17–18). Here textual corruption is posited in the commentary of A. G. Rigg, who was also the first to produce a critical edition of the poem⁴. Rigg prints these lines (17–18), which address Peter Siler, as follows (p. 37):

¹ Cf. R 11,102–103: *Cum ... / sim ... poesis ego supremus in orbe professor.*

² Marguin-Hamon 2019. On this book cf. Adkin forthcoming (a), where the passage at issue in this article is not discussed.

³ Marguin-Hamon 2019, 212–213. On her treatment of this section of the proem cf. Adkin forthcoming (b), where the particular lines in question in the present article are not dealt with.

⁴ Rigg, Binkley 2000. The lately demised Rigg (1937–2019) is acclaimed as “*grammaticus optimus*” by Greti Dinkova-Bruun (2019, VII) at the beginning of a very long (16-page) necrology. Since the task of the *grammaticus* is *poetarum enarratio* (Quint., *Inst.* 1,4,2), Rigg’s failure to “elucidate” the passage currently in question would not seem to bear out Dinkova-Bruun’s flattering “*optimus*”-estimate.

*Tunc recte fiet cum patris fabis, agaso,
et pro gallinis crudo vesceris omaso.*

Rigg's discussion of these lines is notably hesitant. His translation and (dubitant) commentary read thus (p. 52): "17–18: 'Then, boy, all will be well, when you are fed on father's beans and raw tripe instead of chicken', but *fābis* (CL *fāba*) is textually suspect, since the author scans *fābam* correctly at 243". It would seem that Rigg has misunderstood this passage: his punctuation and translation are wrong, while he is also mistaken to assume textual corruption. Significantly Rigg proposes no remedy for the supposed "corruption". All that is in fact necessary is to understand the transmitted text correctly.

When one reads line 17 and reaches *fabis*, one naturally takes it as *fābīs* ("beans"). Here however *fābīs* cannot be right, because it does not scan⁵. Nor is this scansional problem solved by lengthening the "a" (*fābīs*), since the "i" must be short in the fifth *biceps* (*-bīs āg-*)⁶. Here the scansion must accordingly be *fābīs*⁷: "You will say". At this point the reader naturally asks: "You will say — what?" The answer is supplied by the words that surround this *fabis*: "*Patris fabis agaso*"⁸ — "You will say, 'Father's servant'"⁹. Again the reader asks: "Why 'Father's'?" This time the answer is supplied by the parable of the Prodigal Son, who said, "I want to be 'Father's servant'". Here Henry is evidently making a hitherto unidentified reference to this famous parable, the text of which may be cited in full (Luc. 15,16–19):

(16) Et cupiebat (sc. the Prodigal Son) implere ventrem suum de siliquis, quas porci manducabant: et nemo illi dabat. (17) In se autem reversus, dixit, "Quanti mercennarii patris mei abundant panibus, ego autem hic fame pereor. (18) Surgam, et ibo ad patrem meum, et dicam illi, 'Pater, peccavi in caelum et coram te; (19) et iam non sum dignus vocari filius tuus. Fac me sicut unum de mercennariis tuis'".

This Lucan passage has clearly influenced Henry's wording. In particular the latter's afore-discussed "*Patris fabis agaso*" evinces a close correspondence

⁵ Such a scansional howler is unthinkable at the start of a poem that is itself *inter alia* about "scansion". This *Bordo-Siler* is in fact one side of a poetic *agon* between Henry and his opponents (Bordo and Siler) in which one of the issues is metrical correctness; cf. Henry's words to the judge of the contest (ll. 59–60: *Est attendenda tibi lis ... de profitenda / cognitione metri*).

⁶ In the fifth foot, where a dactyl is *de rigueur*, any prosodic incorrectness is particularly noticeable — and censurable.

⁷ For active forms of *fari* cf. (e.g.) *Mittellat. Wörterb. Online* 4 col. 367 ll. 68–69 (s.v. 1. *for*).

⁸ For *fari* thus placed inside direct quotation cf. (e.g.) Enn., *Ann.* 359 Skutsch: "*Malo cruce* (= masc. dat.) *fatur* 'uti des'".

⁹ Rigg's translation of *agaso* as "boy" receives no support from either *Oxf. Lat. Dict.* or *Mittellat. Wörterb.* For *agaso* = "servant" cf. (e.g.) *Oxf. Lat. Dict. Online* (s.v. *agaso*, sect. 1b). Rigg's punctuation (*patris fabis, agaso,*) should be corrected to aforesaid "*Patris fabis agaso*".

with the biblical text. Genitival *patris* is common to both (Luke's v. 17; Henry's l. 17). This genitive depends on Lucan *mercennarii* and Henrician *agaso*: both of these nominatives signify "servant"¹⁰. This Lucan *mercennarii* is separated by just one word from *dixit*, which matches Henry's *fabis*¹¹: both *dixit* and *fabis* introduce direct quotation about "Father's servant". These respective references to "Father's servant" are furthermore followed directly by mention of "food" (Luke's *panibus* [v. 17]; Henry's *gallinis ... omaso* [l. 18]). If moreover Henry's "*Patris*" *fabis* "*agaso*" finds a close counterpart in this Lucan v. 17 (*dixit*, "... *mercennarii patris* ..."), Luke's next two verses (18–19) offer a further parallel: *dicam* ..., "*Pater, ... fac me sicut unum de mercennariis tuis*". Finally attention may be drawn to the Lucan verse which immediately precedes said v. 17. This v. 16 ends thus: *nemo illi* (sc. the Prodigal Son) *dabat* (sc. *siliquas*). These words would appear to have influenced the line in *Bordo-Siler* which likewise comes immediately before said l. 17 with its "*Patris*" *fabis* "*agaso*". This Henrician l. 16 ends thus: *dabimus fragmenta misello* (sc. *tibi*, viz. Siler). Henry's *dabimus* exactly matches Luke's *dabat*¹², while the object of both verbs is starveling fare¹³. This Henrician *dabimus fragmenta* accordingly serves as an apt preparation for the ensuing allusion to the Prodigal Son¹⁴. The final point may be made that this reference to the Prodigal Son is potent invective against Siler: the parable is not only about hunger, but also hussies¹⁵.

It may be asked why Henry should have chosen the verb *fabis* ("you will say")¹⁶. The answer would appear to be that this verb *fabis* makes possible a play on the homographic noun *fabis* ("beans"). When one reads on to the next line (18), one comes to the phrase *vesceris omaso*. This *vesceris* occupies the same penultimate *sedes* as homoeoteleutic *fabis*. The verb *vesceris* is accordingly a further hint that *fabis* should likewise be understood as a verb. At the same time this *vesceris* means "to eat" and governs an ablative (*omaso*). Hence this same

¹⁰ *Mercennarius* is "i. q. mercede conductus ... servus" (*Thes. Ling. Lat. Online* 8 col. 792 l. 3 [s.v.]), and *agaso* is used "per contemptum de servo imperito" (ib. 1 col. 1269 l. 25 [s.v.]). While Henry's choice of *agaso* is determined in part by the need to rhyme with *omaso* (l. 18), this "contemptuous" nuance in *agaso* does make the term appropriately insulting to Peter Siler: *agaso* improves on biblical *mercennarius*.

¹¹ *Fari* is duly glossed as "i. q. dicere" (*Thes. Ling. Lat. Online* 6,1 col. 1029 l. 32 [s.v. (*for*)]).

¹² This Lucan *dabat* is emphasized by its terminal position.

¹³ Lucan *siliquae* corresponds to Henrician *fragmenta*. For *fragmenta* meaning "reliquiae ciborum" cf. *Mittellat. Wörterb. Online* 4 col. 449 l. 58 – col. 450 l. 4 (s.v. *fragmentum*, sect. 3a).

¹⁴ The abrupt switch from *dabimus* ("we") to "*Patris*" puts the reader on the *qui vive* — "What Father?" (Answer: "The Prodigal Son's").

¹⁵ Cf. Luc. 15,30: *filius ... qui devoravit substantiam suam cum meretricibus*.

¹⁶ For "to say" there were numerous synonyms at Henry's disposal; cf. (e.g.) *Thes. Ling. Lat. Online* 1 col. 1460 ll. 25–27 (s.v. *aio*).

vesceris also serves as a cue to cast one's eye back to *fabis*, which looks just like another ablative noun that likewise denotes food ("beans"). Such nounal *fabis* is the typical food of "workmen"¹⁷ — like the *mercennarii* the Prodigal Son wants to join. This *fabis* does in fact evoke the *siliquis* (Luc. 15,16) that the Prodigal Son wants to eat¹⁸. The specific term *fabis* ("beans") is chosen because of the play on *fabis* ("you will say").

One may enquire as to the point of this *jeu* on *fabis*: active *fābīs* ("You will say") is unusual, and ablative *fābīs* ("beans") is unmetrical. In this connection it may be recalled that in 1230¹⁹ Henry had asked Pope Gregory IX for permission to scan amphimacric *nomina sacra* (*trinitas, unitas, caritas*) as anapaests. This request had met with the opposition of one "Peter", who may well be the Peter Siler attacked in the present poem²⁰. It is tempting to think that Henry is taking this opportunity to pay Peter back in the same (metrical) coin: humble "beans" are a piquant contrast to august *nomina sacra*²¹. Line 17 (*tum recte fiet cum ... fabis*) could accordingly be taken to mean: "It 'will serve you right' (*recte fiet*; viz. for picking holes in my prosody), when what 'you will say' (*fābīs*) is (unmetrical) '*fābīs*' ('beans')"²². At the same time this selfsame line 17 (*tum recte fiet cum ... fabis*) could also be understood to mean: "It (viz. the scansion) 'will be right' (*recte fiet*), when what 'you will say' (*fābīs*) is (metrical) '*fābīs*' ('you will say'), not (unmetrical) '*fābīs*' ('beans')"²³. To sum up: this *fabis*, far from being a disfiguring corruption, is in fact a highly sophisticated *jeu grammatical* that does credit to Henry ("Harry"), "Prince" of poets²⁴ — a Pierian "Prince Harry"!

¹⁷ Cf. (e.g.) Mart. 10,48,16: *faba fabrorum*. Such is also the connotation of *omaso* (l. 18); cf. *Thes. Ling. Lat. Online* 9,2 col. 573 l. 15 (s.v. *omasum*: "i. q. species carnis ... vilioris").

¹⁸ Cf. (e.g.) Kissel 1990, 564: "*Siliquae* ('Schoten': Sammelbezeichnung für alle Schotenfrüchte wie Bohnen, Erbsen, Kichererbsen u. ä.)."

¹⁹ So Bund 2014, 240.

²⁰ Cf. Bund 2014, 287; 289 n. 222.

²¹ It may be noted that, if *fābīs* ("beans") is in fact read in l. 17, the second hemistich of this line is a perfect example of a trochaic dimeter: *cūm pātrīs fābīs āgāsō*.

²² *Fabis* is followed immediately by *agaso*, which connotes "*imperitia*"; cf. n. 10 above.

²³ As to this alternation between *fābīs* and *fābīs*, one might compare the "*barbarismus*" which turns *dēōs* into *dēōs* (cf. Donat., *Gramm. mai.* 2,17).

²⁴ Cf. n. 1 above.

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