Calabri rapuere again

Mantua me genuit; Calabri rapuere; tenet nunc

Parthenope; cecini pascua, rura, duces.

“Mantua gave birth to me, (the) Calabrians killed me. Parthenope now holds me; I sang of pastures, plowlands, and leaders.”

1- OBJECTION

“what a majesty in this double ternary structure, where the trilogy of poems (Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid) is balanced by the triad of Italian cities (Mantova, Brindisi, Naples), which embraces the peninsula from north to south, with in the center, and in the splendor of the enjambment, the nymph Parthenope who holds in her name (“the Eye of the Virgin”) as a reflection of the personality of a deceased who was nicknamed the Virgin.”

So much for the thematic organization of the distich, but its rhythmic structure is no less admirable. It can be seen indeed that the first member, namely Mantua me genuit, corresponds to the last one (pascua, rura, duces), both metrically (\(-\ \text{v}\/\text{v} / -\ \text{v}\/\text{v} / -\)) and syllabically (3 + 4); and the same syllabic pattern is found in tenet nunc Parthenope (3 + 4); as regards cecini, it also fits this pattern by doubling the trisyllabic pascua, somewhat like a musical variation or ornamentation.

Remains a fourth element (necessarily intended, in this context, to specify the place of decease), it’s precisely our Calabri rapuere. As it must be taken figuratively (“Calabrians killed me” standing for “I died in Calabria”), and is so the least obvious of all, we may probably assume that it was the last to be inserted in the distich. But anyway, it had both to conform to the syllabic pattern 3 + 4, and to fit in the hexameter between \(-\ \text{v}\/\text{v} / -\ \text{v}\/\text{v} / -\/-\), a configuration that left no choice but \(-\ \text{v}\/\text{v} / -\ \text{v}\/\text{v} / -\ \text{v}\). Since Brundisium and Calabria were excluded for metrical reason, the author had only the choice between Calabri and Calaber, but the perfect indicative ending \(-\ \text{v}\) corresponds to -ere, i.e. a third person plural, which imposed Calabri, at the risk of seeming to charge with murder the unfortunate inhabitants of the region, as rapuere became virtually inevitable.

In conclusion, Calabri rapuere contains no message, it’s just a rhetorical exaggeration that was imposed on the author by the prior choice he had made of a certain syllabic rhythm, probably generated by Mantua me genuit.

2- RESPONSE

It is undeniable that the distich owes much of its success to the repetition of the syllabic pattern 3 + 4, of course wanted by the author. But we should not take the problem in

reverse. We have the choice between two hypotheses: either the clause *Calabri rapuere* was automatically generated from the pattern in question, or on the contrary it’s *Calabri rapuere* which provided this pattern.

In the first case, the poet would have had his thinking dictated and his hand forced in some way to distort reality\(^2\), simply to enter a formal self-imposed frame. This type of impotence is yet little compatible with the perfect mastery he demonstrates in other respects. But this is not all, for we should also admit that, while the circumstances of Virgil’s death were more than suspicious, that anonymous author would have unknowingly and in all innocence brought a murder charge against some obscure “Calabrese” which, for a skilled reader of Virgil, could only recall the famous “snake” of the *Georgics*.

If instead we assume that *Calabri rapuere* was the central core around which the whole epitaph was formed and worked out, we no longer need to take this clause figuratively, and we can do full justice to the genius and ingenuity of a poet who, according to our sources, is none other than Virgil himself.

*Calabri rapuere*, such is therefore the message, the rest is just “windowdressing” and alibi. Write these two words alone on Virgil's tomb, it is a regular accusation; wrap them up in the distich, it is no more than a civil status form: this technique bears the name steganography\(^3\). Commentators have often been surprised at the meagerness of the tribute paid to Virgil (or its absence) by this tritely informative message: “I was born in Mantua, I died in Calabria, I am buried in Naples, I wrote the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics*, the *Aeneid.*” The reason could be that the purpose was not to pay tribute to Virgil, or even simply to identify him (because then indication of the place of death was unnecessary). No, the real purpose of this epitaph was to point the finger of eternal justice to a certain "Snake" which ruled the roost in Rome. -jym (2012.09.30; rev. 2012.10.05).

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\(^2\) The verb *rapere* is easily translated by “snatch away” (= Oxford Latin Dictionary, *s.v.* 6), but in this sense *rapere* does not admit an accusative direct of person. We are so brought to OLD 4 or OLD 5, except that OLD 4 implies a rape (“to carry off (and violate), ravish”). We are so reduced to OLD 5 (“(of death, fate, etc.) to carry off; (similarly, of disease)”), except that our author replaces *Mors* by human beings (*Calabri*), which is an unparalleled example. Calabrians fulfill the office of *Mors*, just like Augustus (but under the very mask of *Mors*) in the famous epigram of Domitius Marsus: [http://www.virgilmurder.org/images/pdf/marsuseng.pdf](http://www.virgilmurder.org/images/pdf/marsuseng.pdf)

Addendum (13.02.10)

When applied to a person, and if its subject is not death, fate, or some fatal disease (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. 5 “(of death, fate, etc.) to carry off; (similarly, of disease)”), the verb *rapere* usually refers to a kidnapping for sexual purposes, like that of the Sabines (Cic., *Rep.* 2.12), of Ganymede (Cic., *Tusc.* 1.65; Virg., *Aen.* 5.255; Hor., *Od.* 3.20.16), or of Helen of Troy (Ov., *Amor.* 2.12.17-18): *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. 4: “to carry off (and violate), ravish”. So, the statement *Calabri rapuere* implicitly presents Virgil as an erotic stake. Now, as it happens, this symbolism is typical of the Augustan poets, and Horace had just, in one of his odes, dramatized the deadly threat Augustus, in the form of Cyrus (“Master”), posed to Virgil, disguised for the occasion as a certain Tyndaris (cf. [http://www.espace-horace.org/jym/odes_1/O_I_17.htm](http://www.espace-horace.org/jym/odes_1/O_I_17.htm)); elsewhere, the (deceased) poet appears as a *Puer delicatus*: [http://www.espace-horace.org/jym/odes_2/O_II_09.htm](http://www.espace-horace.org/jym/odes_2/O_II_09.htm). A prophetic poem, since a few years later, in the elegy 2.12 of his *Amores*, Ovid will show the same Augustus (as anti-Ego) claiming victory after his conquest of a new “Tyndaris”. This conquest is in fact a killing, but such a reality is sufficiently well hidden to deceive hurried readers (cf. “La mort de Virgile d’après Properce et Ovide”, *AC* 66 (1997), 177-206). In the present epitaph, on the contrary, it is death which masks “kidnapping” as a metaphor of the violence used by “Calabrians” (or “THE Calabrian”) on the person of Virgil. A murder disguised as a natural death: that’s the secret.