

PROPERTIUS' TALKING HORSE

qualis et Adrasti fuerit vocalis Arion,
tristis ad Archemori funera victor equus

(Prop. 2.34.37–8)

All editors and translators of Propertius seem convinced that the Roman poet has endowed the horse Arion with the power of speech. I present a few sample translations of the two lines:

how, mourning at the funeral of Archemorus, Adrastus' victorious steed spake aloud (H. E. Butler¹).

Adrastus' horse, Arion, victory-crowned,
Grieved at Archemorus' grave with human sound (A. E. Watts²)

....., or how again
Adrastus' mount, Arion, found a voice
To speak his sorrow for Archemorus (C. W. Mendell³)

While modern commentators debate other aspects of the couplet, they appear of one mind in their understanding of 'vocalis Arion'.⁴

Some concern has been expressed about the numerous apparently nominative epithets, but solutions have been directed towards *tristis* rather than *vocalis*. For example, Camps writes '*tristis* as epithet of *equus* seems stylistically improbable beside the other nominative epithets *vocalis* and *victor*'.⁵ He would read '*tristia*' (originally suggested by Heinsius), as would Shackleton Bailey, who compares Virgil, *Georg.* 4.256 '*tristia funera ducunt*' (to which one might add '*tristia... funera*', Hor. *Ep.* 2.2.24) and argues that '*tristia*' is suitable because Archemorus' death was ἀρχὴ μόρου for the buriers. Bailey also rejects taking '*tristis*' as genitive (Phillimore), on the ground that although the name was '*tristis*', the baby could hardly be called so.⁶

I feel, however, that the arrangement 'qualis... Arion | tristis... equus', with these nominatives on the corners, as it were, of the couplet, is quite a deliberate one, emphasising the key points of the sentence: 'What a (wonderful) horse Arion was, grieving at the funeral etc.' For 'qualis... equus' we may compare a phrase from another Virgilian poem, the *Aeneid*, 'quales Diomedis equi' (1.752)⁷ and, for a similar use of *ad* referring to an occasion of sadness, we have 'si ad pii rogi filii | lugetur' (Catullus 39.4–5). The retention of '*tristis*' as a nominative places emphasis on the horse's grief, a motif which is modelled on the passage in the *Iliad* (17.426–55) describing the grief of Achilles' horses at the death of Patroclus.⁸ The motif is

¹ *Propertius* (Loeb 1912, repr. 1962), p. 169.

² *The Poems of Sextus Propertius* (Chichester, 1961), p. 96.

³ *Latin Poetry: the New Poets and the Augustans* (New Haven and London, 1965), p. 202. Cf. R. Musker, *The Poems of Propertius* (London, 1972), p. 125 and J. Warden, *The Poems of Propertius* (Indianapolis and New York, 1972), p. 129.

⁴ Cf. e.g. 'endowed among other remarkable attributes with the gift of speech', W. A. Camps, *Propertius: Elegies Book II* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 228; 'Arion, Adrastus' marvellous horse with the power of speech and one human foot', L. Richardson, Jr., *Propertius: Elegies I–IV* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1977), p. 313; '...a speaking racehorse's victory and mourning at an infant's funeral games', H.-P. Stahl, *Propertius: 'Love' and 'War': Individual and State under Augustus* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1985), p. 175.

⁵ Camps, op. cit. (n. 4), p. 228.

⁶ D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Propertiana*² (Amsterdam, 1967), p. 133.

⁷ 'Qualis' stresses the wonderful nature of the horse, which was born of Gaia, σέβας θνητοῖσιν ιδέσθαι (Antim. F 32.5 Wyss; cf. ὅς θεόφιν γένος ἦεν, *Il.* 23.347). Diomedes' horses too were of divine origin, bred by Anchises from those given to Tros by Zeus and captured from Aeneas by Diomedes (*Il.* 5.265ff.), who won the chariot race at the Patroclus Games with them (*Il.* 23.290–513).

⁸ As noticed by Richardson, pp. 313–14.

repeated in the Funeral Games, when Achilles says that his horses will stay with him and not compete in the Games, in their grief for Patroclus (23.276–84). To read ‘tristis’ as a genitive or to change it to ‘tristia’ would lose this Homeric allusion, so fitting to the context.

‘Vocalis Arion’ could be viewed as yet another reflection of Homer, who depicts Achilles’ horse, Xanthus, as prophesying his master’s death.⁹ But Homer presents this episode as a most abnormal occurrence. Hera gave the horse the ability to speak (407), and when he had spoken, the Erinyes immediately put a stop to this power (418).¹⁰ In the case of Arion, no evidence survives in Greek tradition of his ever speaking. Neither Apollodorus (3.6.8) nor Pausanias, who tells us much about the horse (8.25.7–10, with quotations from the *Iliad*, the Cyclic *Thebaid*, and Antimachus’ *Thebaid*),¹¹ even hints at such an ability.

Propertius’ reference to Arion is the third item in a series of examples of themes taken from epic and tragedy which, although Lynceus may tell them yet again, will be of no help to him in love, any more than a description of the fate of Amphiarus or the destruction of Capaneus.¹² The reference to Arion and these other episodes from the war against Thebes may be to the *Thebaid* of Antimachus, who is expressly mentioned in line 45.¹³ In the case of Arion, the motif of the horse grieving, despite his victory, for the dead Archemorus would surely be sufficiently delicate and attractive (if not more so) without any supernatural equine words of sorrow. Homer was content with the picture of tears and trailing manes.¹⁴

The suggestion that Arion may not be ‘vocalis’ after all is of course possible only because we have another name with which the epithet may agree, namely ‘Adrasti’. The epithet can, moreover, be shown to be eminently suitable for that Greek hero, whose traditional image is that of an eloquent speaker. Our earliest source is Tyrtaeus, who in his list of abilities that he deems worthless unless a man also possesses the courage of a hoplite, includes γλώσσαν Ἀδρήστου μελιχόγῃην,¹⁵ ‘the gentle-voiced tongue of Adrastus’. Similarly, Plato names Adrastus, along with Pericles, as an expert in the art of speaking and calls him τὸν μελίγῃην Ἀδραστον, ‘honey-voiced Adrastus’,¹⁶ a phrase possibly taken from an early poetic source.¹⁷ Only slightly less direct are the words of Pindar, celebrating the success of Hagesias of Syracuse in *Ol.* 6, where the poet tells the victor that the praise which awaits him is that which Adrastus spoke for Amphiarus, ὃν ἐν δίκῃ | ἀπὸ γλώσσης Ἀδραστος ... | φθέγγεσθαι (13–14). Pindar adds that the ‘honey-voiced’ (μελίφθογγοι) Muses will approve his song (21).

Adrastus can thus be shown to have been celebrated for his voice and I would suggest that ‘vocalis’ should be understood as a reference to that fact. There are indeed other examples of ‘vocalis’ used of people famed for their voices, e.g.

⁹ *Il.* 19.404ff.

¹⁰ Cf. Mark W. Edwards, *Homer: Poet of the Iliad* (Baltimore and London, 1987), pp. 287–8.

¹¹ *Il.* 23.346–7 (see also scholia ad loc.); Cyclic *Thebaid* F6^A Davies *EGF*; Antimachus F32, 33, 35 Wyss.

¹² The thought is closely paralleled in Prop. 1.9.9–10. Cf. D. W. T. C. Vessey, *PVS* 9 (1969–70), 60–2.

¹³ Arion is mentioned in F32 and 33 Wyss and is possibly the subject in F36. Propertius’ earlier references to the rivers Achelous and Maeander (33–6), may be to the *Heraclea* of Panyassis, cf. Vessey, *PVS* 9, p. 62.

¹⁴ *Il.* 17.427; 437–41; 23.283–4.

¹⁵ F12.8 West.

¹⁶ *Phaedrus* 269a5.

¹⁷ Possibly the Cyclic *Thebaid*, cf. P. von der Mühl in G. Meyer, *Die stilistische Verwendung der Nominalkomposition im Griechischen* (*Philol. Suppl.* 16.3 [1923], p. 23 n. 2); R. Merkelbach, *Kritische Beiträge zu antiken Autoren* (Meisenheim, 1974), pp. 2f. But Bernabé (*Poetae Epici Graeci*) lists it as *Fragmentum Dubium* (11), sharing the caution of M. Davies, *Mus. Helv.* 37 (1980), 131–2. Davies himself, however, does not include it in his *EGF*.

'vocalem... Orphea',¹⁸ 'vocalis nymphe... | ...resonabilis Echo',¹⁹ 'Mercuri, dei vocalis' (the divine herald),²⁰ and, strikingly, Ovid's 'vocalis Arion',²¹ of Arion the lyric poet, not the horse. This last may be a deliberate echo of Propertius' phrase, despite the different Arion, but it is hard to judge whether or not it indicates that Ovid read Propertius' 'vocalis' as a nominative or, if he did, that he was right. Propertius himself, in his only other example of the word, uses it of dogs simply barking (4.4.84), but Tibullus, in a list of portents, does tell of cattle apparently speaking, 'fataque vocales praemonuisse boves' (2.5.78).²²

The only Roman poet to mention the horse Arion is, not surprisingly, Statius, but in his fullest description (*Theb.* 6.30ff.) he does not say that the horse had the ability to speak (nor does he at *Silv.* 1.1.52). When describing Adrastus' escape from Thebes, however, he says 'fata monentem | conversumque iugo propellit Ariona' (11.442-3). The words 'fata monentem' would seem to imply speech, cf. Tibullus' words quoted above. But rather than treat this as a sign that Statius perhaps interpreted Propertius' 'vocalis' as a nominative, it is better to view his passage as modelled directly on the Homeric one about Xanthus warning Achilles of his fate.²³

The close relationship between horse and hero-master evident in both epics makes this occasion of Adrastus' escape a much more suitable one than the funeral of Archemorus to have Arion break into speech. In each epic the faithful horse speaks only in his master's great crisis. The tradition is emphatic about the crucial role of Arion in Adrastus' escape,²⁴ but even in regard to that episode there is no sign of the 'speaking horse' motif before Statius.

To return to Propertius 2.34.37, I would suggest that, in the context of a theme taken from Greek epic, it is surely preferable, given the choice of two proper names with which an epithet might agree, to choose the interpretation which is most in keeping with poetic tradition, in this case 'Adrasti...vocalis' rather than 'vocalis Arion'. There is a saying about jumping to conclusions which we might adapt to the present context: 'When you hear hoofbeats, think of horses, not zebras.' Let me suggest: 'When you hear speech, think of humans, not horses.'

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¹⁸ Hor. *Od.* 1.12.7-8; cf. 'ille vocali genitus Camena' (i.e. Orpheus), Sen. *Med.* 625.

¹⁹ Ovid, *Met.* 3.357-8.

²⁰ Apul. *Met.* 6.7.

²¹ Ovid, *Fasti* 2.91.

²² The speaking cow or ox is a commonplace in such lists, e.g. Livy, 3.10.6; Val. Max. 1.6.5. Pliny (*H.N.* 8.183) says 'est frequens in prodigiis priscorum bovem locutum'.

²³ *Il.* 19.404ff.; cf. especially 'fata monentem | conversumque iugo' with ὑπὸ ζυγὸφι προσέφη, 404. Cf. H. Juhnke, *Homerisches in römischer Epik flavischer Zeit* (Zetemata, Heft 53, München, 1972), p. 368.

²⁴ Cf. Cyclic *Thebaid* F6^A Davies *EGF*; Paus. 8.25.7; Apollod. 3.6.8; Hygin, *Fab.* 70.

TURNUS AND HIS ANCESTORS

In Book 6.88-94 of the *Aeneid* reference is made by the Cumaean Sibyl to the fact that there will be terrible wars on the Trojans' arrival at Lavinium. The details given by the Sibyl evoke the war at Troy; there will be a Simois, a Xanthus, and a Greek camp. Moreover, there will be another Achilles in Latium and the war will again be fought over a woman. Aeneas, when he hears this, has just arrived in Italy after the war at Troy and a gruelling seven-year journey. The prophecy is therefore the last thing that he wants to hear, but he responds very stoically and then proceeds to ask the Sibyl's permission to enter the Underworld (6.103ff.). Aeneas' filial *pietas* is therefore