

## THE THEATRICALITY OF THE DEATHS OF C. GRACCHUS AND FRIENDS<sup>1</sup>

The deaths of the Gracchi and those who followed them were nothing if not dramatic—and while there is no reason to doubt the broad outlines of the events as preserved in the historical tradition, it is also plausible that the details were enhanced in the retelling.<sup>2</sup> Wiseman has taken up an earlier suggestion that the death of Gaius Gracchus was treated on the Roman stage; and argued persuasively that the narrative setting, as transmitted by Plutarch, suggests (literally) a theatrical scenario. He conjectures a stage with the expected three doors: one to the temple of Diana, to which Gaius Gracchus fled for sanctuary after Opimius' armed assault on the Aventine, the other two being to the houses of Gracchus and of his ally Fulvius Flaccus. The scenes are the eve of Gracchus' death and the morning of the tragedy. The violent episodes that followed might have been recounted by a messenger.<sup>3</sup>

If the theme was a popular one (at whatever periods it was deemed ripe for performance),<sup>4</sup> there is every reason to imagine that it was reworked with variations which focused on other aspects of the drama; and that it enjoyed multiple productions.

A number of items might be adduced by way of ancillary addenda to Wiseman's hypothesis. They illustrate perhaps two aspects of what may have been theatrical (re)treatments:

1. the remarkable mutability of the *dramatis personae*;
2. the emphasis on friendship and friendship betrayed.

1 The variability of the players' identities is striking. Prosopographically, the surviving accounts offer a dog's breakfast. After the failure of the Aventine cause (to follow Plutarch's narrative), Gaius Gracchus considers the alternatives. Contemplating suicide, he is prevented from that course by 'two of his most faithful friends',

<sup>1</sup> This paper arose from research undertaken on the Macquarie Dictionary of Roman Biography Project, generously funded by Dr C. McCullough-Robinson. We would also like to acknowledge the generosity of Professor Peter Wiseman in making available to us some personal notes on this subject.

<sup>2</sup> The 'deaths of princes' (*dominantium exitus*) tend to excite wild stories, said Tacitus (*Ann.* 4.11, decrying the excesses of oral tradition).

<sup>3</sup> T. P. Wiseman, 'The tragedy of Gaius Gracchus', in *Roman Drama and Roman History* (Exeter, 1998), 52–9. The suggestion is persuasive; the plausibility has been argued fully in the same work, chs 1 and 4, with reference to previous scholarship (1–16, 35–51 respectively); cf. Cl. Nicolet, *The World of the Citizen in Republican Rome*, English trans. P. S. Falla (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), 366–7.

The source of the earlier suggestion with regard to C. Gracchus was K. Meiser, *Ueber historische Dramen der Römer* (München, 1887), see esp. 32–6. Meiser explored the dramatic qualities of the Gracchan saga, opening with the dream which bound Gaius to his elder brother's Fortune and closing with the fortitude of their mother Cornelia after Gaius' death. Wiseman, to greater effect, we believe, focuses on the theatrical qualities of the particular episode above.

<sup>4</sup> On this question, see the Appendix.

a Pomponius<sup>5</sup> and a Licinius, who snatch away his sword.<sup>6</sup> According to Orosius (5.12.7), on the other hand, Gracchus was prevented by a certain Laetorius, not in the temple of Diana (to which he and Fulvius had first repaired) but in that of Minerva.<sup>7</sup> The counsel of flight prevails. The scene, according to the better-known version of Plutarch, is highly dramatic with a voyeuristic populace cheering on the action. (The potential for metatheatrical irony was rich, especially given Gaius' imprecations at *C. G.* 16.5 against the fatal passivity of an ungrateful populace.) With pursuers closing in, his two friends (sc. Pomponius and Licinius) insisted that Gracchus continue his flight while they held 'the wooden bridge over the Tiber' (sc. Sublicius) which they did against all comers until both were killed.

Gaius had no other companion in his flight but a slave named Philocrates. All the spectators along the road urged him to run faster, as though they were watching a race, but not a man came to his help or would even provide him with a horse, although he begged them to do so, for his enemies were close on his heels. (*C. G.* 16.4–17.2; using the translation of Scott-Kilvert for 17.2)

Valerius Maximus (4.7.2) and the *De Viris Illustribus* (65.5) give the defenders of Gracchus' flight as Pomponius and Laetorius, with Pomponius making his stand at the *porta Trigemina* and Laetorius at the bridge.<sup>8</sup> Valerius Maximus, whose account is the more dramatically elaborated, has Laetorius, overcome at last by sheer numbers, turning his sword on himself and leaping into the river. In Velleius Paterculus (2.6.6), it is Pomponius, acting alone for all that Velleius' account records, who holds the bridge *more Coclitis*, before turning his sword upon himself.<sup>9</sup>

According to Orosius, who does not offer the identities of those friends who fought 'long and hard', and to their deaths, to secure Gracchus' safe retreat, the latter made it with difficulty to the *pons Sublicius* where he offered his neck to an (unnamed) slave (5.12.8). According to most versions, however, Gracchus meets his destiny on the slopes of the Janiculum. Appian (*Bell. Civ.* 1.26) has Gracchus cross the river by 'the wooden bridge' and reach an unnamed grove where he presents his throat to an (unnamed) slave rather than be taken. According to Plutarch, Gracchus reached the

<sup>5</sup> This man was equestrian according to Vell. Pat. 2.6.6. Possibly the M. Pomponius mentioned at Cic. *De Div.* 2.62, the man to whom C. Gracchus wrote retailing the famous anecdote of the two snakes which had appeared in the Sempronian household prior to his father's death (Gundel, *RE* Pomponius 24; Cl. Nicolet, *L'Ordre équestre* [Paris, 1974], 2.990 [no. 284]), and possibly also the Pomponius Rufus whose *liber collectorum* contained, according to Val. Max. (4.4. *praef.*), an anecdote about the pride in her sons of Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi (Drumann-Groebe, *GR* Pomponius 13; Gundel; an identification challenged by Nicolet).

<sup>6</sup> Plut. *C. G.* 16.4: τὸν πιστοτάτων ἐταίρων; a dozen lines further on, οἱ δύο φίλοι.

<sup>7</sup> The difference here might be explained simply as an error of abbreviation or conflation (probably on the part of Plutarch, since Orosius' account [5.12.7–8] is the more topographically precise). The *De Vir. Ill.* (65.5) omits this incident (i.e. Gracchus' contemplation of suicide), but has, in its place, Gracchus twisting his ankle leaping from the temple of Luna (which Orosius has also situated on the escape route of the Gracchani).

<sup>8</sup> The *De Vir. Ill.* provides Laetorius with a *praenomen* (P.).

<sup>9</sup> Since, of the accounts which offer names, every version other than that of Plutarch gives Laetorius and Pomponius, it is just possible (as Münzer [*RE* Licinius 5] suggested) that Plutarch has confused Laetorius with Licinius, the finely educated slave whose musical talents were utilized to moderate Gracchus' oratorical passions (Cic. *De Orat.* 3.225; Plut. *T. G.* 2.4–5; cf. Val. Max. 8.10.1; Quintil. *Inst. Or.* 1.10.27; Plut. *Mor.* 456A = *De Cohib. Ira* 6; Aul. Gell. 1.11.10–16; Dio 25, fr. 85.2; Ammian. 30.4.19). An actual identification of the latter with the defender of the *pons Sublicius* is ruled out by the fact that the servile *litteratus homo* (subsequently a freedman of Gaius' wife Licinia?) survived the crisis to become a client of Lutatius Catulus (cos. 102) (Cic. loc. cit.). The fact that these two individuals cannot be identified with each other does not rule out an error on Plutarch's part, in which case the item has no place in the present argument.

grove sacred to the Erin(n)yes, i.e. Furies, the *De Vir. Ill.* locating this sanctuary as the *lucus Fur(r)inae* (which almost certainly amounts to the same thing).<sup>10</sup> Plutarch knows of two alternative versions at this point. One is that Philocrates killed his master and then himself; the other that both were taken alive, Philocrates killed to release his hold on Gracchus and Gracchus himself beheaded. The *De Vir. Ill.* offers a different set of alternatives: one, that Gracchus died by the hand of his slave; the other, that Gracchus died by his own hand. The *De Vir. Ill.* then follows another twist: the slave's name was Euphorus (as at Vell. Pat. 2.6.6 where it is given as Euporus). Val. Max. 6.8.3 knows of two versions, one giving the name Philocrates, the other Euporus.<sup>11</sup>

The drama does not end there. A price had been set on the head of Gracchus (its weight in gold). L. Septumuleius is said to have snatched the head from another, and carried it to Opimius for the reward, the head weighing in at seventeen and two-third pounds, Septumuleius having poured molten lead into its cavity (Plut. *C.G.* 17.3; cf. Val. Max. 9.4.3, Plin. *N.H.* 33.48). According to Diodorus Siculus (34/35.29), the first man on the scene after Gracchus had been slain by his own (unnamed) slave was a certain L. Vitellius. It was this Vitellius who detached the head and sought the nefarious reward (with the ingenuity which other sources attributed to Septumuleius).<sup>12</sup> This version, which Diodorus offers in some detail, is all the more remarkable in that no other Vitellii are known to have been active in this period. But it is an odd name for Diodorus to have dreamt up. The Vitellii were no strangers to republican history—at least in later annals. They appear amongst the first traitors to the republican cause, plotting the return of the Tarquins. Thereafter the family name, in some 'historical' traditions at least, carried its own bad odour.<sup>13</sup>

2 Then there is the theme of friendships and friendships betrayed which is surely a motif played out to an unusual degree (and not always consistently between versions).<sup>14</sup> The heroic stands of Laetorius and Pomponius (or Pomponius and Licinius) are, of course, the obvious illustration; friends who were willing to meet

<sup>10</sup> Fur(r)ina was a goddess whose qualities and attributes were little remembered by the Romans of the late Republic (Varro, *L.L.* 6.19), but who was associated with the Furies (Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 3.46). On the position of her sanctuary, L. Richardson, Jr, *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore and London, 1992), 235 and J. Calzini Gysens in E. M. Steinby (ed.), *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* 3 (Rome, 1996), 193–4.

<sup>11</sup> Professor Wiseman suggests to us that this confusion with regard to the names of the minor (historical) characters may illustrate what happens when an event is 'known' by a performance that had no text.

<sup>12</sup> Münzer's suggestion (*RE* Septumuleius) that this is an alternative name, a mere error by Diodorus, leaves us unsatisfied.

<sup>13</sup> On the disputed traditions, Suet. *Vitell.* 1–2.2 (one version allowed the family an ancient and noble lineage, the other a mean one, known for villainous profit-seeking in times of civil strife); cf. the discussion by Wiseman in 'Valerius Antius and the palimpsest of history' (*Roman Drama and Roman History* [n. 3], 75–89), see esp. 80–1. In the light of that discussion, we may wonder whether we have here a standard stage villain.

<sup>14</sup> The motif was not one confined to the tragic fortunes of Gaius Gracchus. The strain placed on loyalties in times of unparalleled crisis was relevant as much to the events of 133/132 as to those of 121. Plutarch (*T.G.* 10–11) informs us that M. Octavius, the tribune whose resolute opposition drew Tiberius Gracchus across his own Rubicon, was in fact an old friend whose intransigence was unexpected by Gracchus and whose continued resistance to Gracchus' pleas prompted dramatic outpourings of emotion on the public stage. Dio (24.83.4) thought that Octavius was an old family enemy—and acting according to the dictates of a vendetta. The constancy of Tiberius' ally, Blossius of Cumae, with the details of context subject to variation, became an *exemplum* of fidelity and courage.

death in exchange for the preservation of Gracchus. 'On this bridge, where Horatius Cocles had demonstrated his love of country, [Laetorius] had shown himself for *amicitia* ready willingly to sacrifice his life' (Val. Max. 4.7.2): patriotism has been replaced by a more human (and more political) drama—a drama rich in love and fidelity. In one of the versions known to Plutarch of Gracchus' last moments, and not the one that prevailed in most surviving sources, Philocrates was the epitome of the faithful slave, clinging to his master with such force that he needed to be dispatched under a hail of blows to free his protective hold. In all versions which have the slave kill Gracchus and which elaborate the deed it is an act of (heroic) service: [Euporus] *non segnus se ipse interemit, quam domino succurrerat* (Vell. Pat.); cf. Val. Max. 6.8.3 where the contention over the slave's name is considered not as important as the vigour of his fidelity: *ego de nomine nihil disputo, famularis tantum modo fidei robur admiror*.

In the context of Gracchus' friends and followers being rounded up for execution, we have the dramatic story of the suicide of Herennius Siculus, who dashed his head against the prison door jamb to provide, in one version, an example for a weeping friend, and to rob his executioners of the satisfaction of his death. According to Valerius Maximus (9.12 [*de mortibus non vulgaribus*].6), he was the *haruspex* and friend of Gracchus (who had already been killed, it must be assumed). According to Velleius Paterculus (2.7.2), his friend was the young Fulvius Flaccus minor.<sup>15</sup>

Such loyalties are offset by the betrayal of friendship. According to Valerius Maximus (9.4.3; probably the source for Pliny, *N.H.* 33.48), Septumuleius was *C. Gracchi familiaris*; according to the *De Vir. Ill.* 65, an *amicus*. Consistency ought not to be anticipated; according to Plut. *C.G.* 17.3, Septumuleius was the friend of Opimius.<sup>16</sup> The crucial details vary; the motif of friendship remains. The former version is the more popular, and the betrayal stressed—even when Septumuleius is replaced by a Vitellius. According to Diodorus, Vitellius had been one of Gracchus' *philoï*; 'not only did [he] not grieve at what had befallen [Gracchus], but [sought to profit in grisly fashion.] He was despised for the rest of his life for his betrayal of friendship.' This theme—the dictates of friendship, met or betrayed—is a constant.

The other side of the coin was represented by the animus of Opimius who took sordid advantage of a public occasion to seek revenge in a private feud. The claims of acting in the public interest were a mask for personal vengeance and hatred: *factum*

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the focus, amidst the widespread carnage, on the cruelly undeserved fate of the young Q. Fulvius Flaccus a 'youth of rare beauty' (Vell. Pat. 2.7.2; Plut. *C.G.* 17.5; App. *Bell. Civ.* 1.26 similarly singling out the fate of Flaccus for comment [though curiously indicating a concession to his dignity on the part of Opimius]. Orosius 5.12.9 knew of no such grace: *Flaccus adulescens in robore necatus est*).

<sup>16</sup> Badian, taking Septumuleius as 'the man who killed C. Gracchus', implicitly attempts to reconcile the divergent traditions by having Septumuleius 'once . . . a supporter of Gracchus, but now a friend of Opimius', which he takes as evidence for the disaffection of the citizenry outside the city (*Foreign Clientelae* 264–70 B.C. [Oxford, 1958], 190–1). No one of the sources confirms this political conversion in advance of Septumuleius' exercise in bounty-hunting. Badian is surely right (191, n. 2, following Münzer) in identifying Septumuleius as a Roman citizen (domiciled in Italy outside Rome: this is what Badian means by *agrestis*; cf. 181 n. 3)—the evidence of Plut. *C.G.* 17.4, where the head-hunters who brought in the head of Flaccus were refused a reward on the grounds of their ignobility, suggests a certain level of status for Septumuleius. It may well be that, historically, Septumuleius' position on the day is to be explained by his membership of a class of citizens which, it may be surmised, initially supportive, had fallen away from Gracchus; but there is no evidence that any source for the incident viewed Septumuleius' act as politically motivated.

*Opimii, quod inimicitarum quaesita erat ultio, minor secuta auctoritas, et visa ultio privato odio magis quam publicae vindictae data* (Vell. Pat. 2.7.6).

One final item might give pause. The bodies of the Gracchani were thrown into the river (as had been those of the followers of Tiberius in a sinister night-time operation); those of Flaccus and Gracchus headless (Vell. Pat. 2.6.7; Plut. *C.G.* 17.5). Orosius (5.12.9) singularly reports that the headless corpse of Gaius was sent to his mother Cornelia at Misenum. One might wonder if this grisly detail was the product of theatrical imagination. Perhaps this is to underestimate the savagery of the historical Opimius. In the rhetoric of the *boni*, Opimius was a champion of the state (Cic. *Cat.* 1.4; *Pis.* 95; *Mil.* 8; 83; *Phil.* 8.14); *servator rei publicae* (Planc. 69); *fortissimus consul* (*P.Red. ad Quir.* 11); *praeclare vir de re publica meritus* (*Sest.* 140)—his ultimate fate was undeserved (ibid.; cf. Planc. 70). Remembered for the drama of 121, he was an exemplum of *crudelitas* and *saevitia*.<sup>17</sup>

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## APPENDIX

No attempt has been made here to provide specific contexts for the variations of treatment. Given the present state of evidence, such attempts can probably not be made. Wiseman suggests that the *popularis* activity around the time of the *quaestio Mamiliana* provides a possible context for the theatrical treatment of C. Gracchus and his martyrdom. That is attractive, but purely speculative (and Wiseman would not suggest otherwise). Revisions which entailed alterations to the identities of the protagonists (especially with the potential for Dickensian names such as servile nomenclature traditionally offered) might be suspected in the context of the ideological tug of war waged between *popularis* and *optimata* elements, as can be seen

<sup>17</sup> Vell. Pat. 2.6.5; 7.2–3 (allowing that otherwise Opimius might have been accounted *sanctus* and *gravis*); Oros. 5.12.10 (*in bello fortis . . . in quaestione crudelis*); cf. Sall. *Iug.* 16.2 (according Opimius the status of a *homo clarus* but one who *acerrume victoriam . . . exercuerat*); Plut. *C.G.* 17.3–18.1.

Even Opimius' role, however, does not pass alone into this register of honour (or brutality) without challenge. And again, the theme of personal relationships is to the fore. Ampelius alludes to the killing of C. Gracchus three times (19.3 [in passing]; 19.4; and 26.2) and consistently (on the two occasions where he elaborates) reduces the role of Opimius to a parity with that of Dec. Iunius Brutus Callaicus (whom he gives as Callaecius) (at 19.4, it is Brutus' role, not Opimius', that is conspicuously singled out within a list of *Romani qui in toga fuerunt illustres*, and it is only for that act that Brutus is commemorated, although elsewhere [47.1] Ampelius knows of Brutus' military achievement). Moreover, Brutus is given by Ampelius (on both occasions) as the father-in-law of Gracchus (in contradiction to the dominant tradition which assigns that affinity to P. Licinius Dives Crassus Mucianus). In the version known to Ampelius, the drama of Gracchus' death cut across family ties. The same tradition was known to, and asserted against the generally accepted variant by, Nepos (fr. 9 Peter = Plut. *T.G.* 21.3). The dramatic tensions within the family would by no means have been lessened if modern speculation is correct and Brutus Callaicus was a relatively late comer on the (family) scene, having married the widow of Licinius Crassus Mucianus sometime in the 120s (Münzer, *RE* Iunius 57 and *Roman Aristocratic Parties and Families* [1920; English trans. T. Ridley, Baltimore, 1999], 249; cf. E. S. Gruen, *Roman Politics and the Criminal Courts, 149–78 B.C.* [Cambridge, MA, 1968], 98; R. T. Ridley in T. W. Hillard *et al.* [edd.], *Ancient History in a Modern University* [Macquarie University, 1998], 1.377). There was always a place for a wicked stepfather on the stage.

in the historiographical, and possibly iconographic, traditions relating to Cornelia, 'mother of the Gracchi'—with, on the one hand, conservative playwrights such as Accius (had he dealt with contemporary happenings as well as issues), who enjoyed the patronage of Dec. Brutus Callaicus, being prepared to castigate *popularis* aspirations to tyranny<sup>18</sup> and, on the other, those who fitted more comfortably into the *popularis* environment of the Roman theatre world.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. B. Bilinski, *Accio ed i Gracchi. Contributo alla storia della plebe e della tragedia romana* (Rome, 1957), *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> See, again, Bilinski (n. 18), 1–17 for references to earlier scholarship (esp. 16), and for more recent work, Nicolet (n. 3), 361–73 and Wiseman (n. 3), 1–16.