OVID AND THE LECTISTERNIUM (*METAMORPHOSES* 8. 651–60)

interea medias fallunt sermonibus horas
concutiuntque torum de molli fluminis ulva
inpositum *lecto* sponda pedibusque salignis.
vestibus hunc velant, quas non nisi tempore festo
sternere consuerant, sed et haec vilisque vetusque
vestis erat, *lecto* non indignanda saligno.
adcubuere dei.

Meanwhile they beguiled the intervening time with their talk and smoothed out a mattress of soft sedge-grass placed on a couch with frame and feet of willow. They threw drapery over this, which they were not accustomed to bring out except on festal days; but even this was a cheap thing and well-worn, a very good match for the willow couch. The gods reclined.

The lines quoted stem from Ovid's description of the hospitality of the aged Baucis and Philemon to their guests.[1] That these guests are actually the disguised Jupiter and Mercury is crucial to the narrative, but, as yet, Baucis and Philemon have no reason to believe that they are other than mortals (for the disguise, see Ov. *Met.* 8.626–7). The gods have visited a thousand other homes and a thousand times they have been turned away; what makes Baucis and Philemon unusual and earns them their final reward is their readiness to show kindness to complete strangers (Ov. *Met.* 8.628–30). In Book 1 of the *Metamorphoses*, Lycaon too is tested by a visit from Jupiter and pays for his violation of commensality by metamorphosis into a wolf (*Met.* 1.163–252). The corrupt generation which he represents will be wiped out in the flood from which only Deucalion and Pyrrha survive (*Met.* 1. 253–312). The same fate now awaits those who turned the visitors away (*Met.* 8.689–97).

All this is familiar. What has not been noted by previous commentators on Ovid is the pun lurking in the lines quoted and its relationship to the morality tale which the poet presents.[2] For those words which I have italicized in the description of the laying of the table at which the gods recline (*lecto . . . sternere . . . lecto*) bring to mind the Roman rite of the *lectisternium*.[3] This ritual features repeatedly in the first decade of Livy's histories,[4] and the occasion of its first performance in 399 B.C. meets with the following description:

duumviri sacris faciundis *lectisternio* tunc primum in urbe Romana facto per dies octo Apollinem Latonamque et Dianam, Herculem Mercurium atque Neptunum tribus quam amplissime tum apparari poterat *stratis lectis* placavere. privatim quoque id sacrum celebratum est. tota urbe patentibus ianuis promiscuoque usu rerum omnium in propatulo posito, notos ignotosque passim advenas in hospitium ductos ferunt et cum inimicis quoque benigne ac comiter sermones habitos, iurgiis ac litibus temperatum; vinctis quoque dempta in eos dies vincula; religioni deinde fuisse quibus eam opem di tulissent vinciri.

[1] I follow Ehwald in regarding verses 652–5a as interpolations.

[2] Bömer at Ov. *Met.* 8.657–8 points to his own note at Ov. *Met.* 6.431 'stravere torum' and to the parallels for the collocation collected there. He does not consider the possibility of a more specific allusion to the 'lectisternium'.

[3] For this fairly obvious etymology, cf. Livy 22.1.19; Aug. *De civ. Dei* 3.17.2.

[4] Livy 5.13.6–8, 7.2.2, 7.27.1, 8.25.1; cf. 21.62.8, 22.1.18–20, 22.10.9, 36.1.2, 40.59.7; 42.30.8; Macrob. *Sat.* 1.6.13. For discussion of the rite, its relationship to the Greek theoxeny, and its development, see K. Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (Munich, 1960), 242–4; Ogilvie at Livy 5.13.6–8; M. Beard, J. North, and S. Price, *Religions of Rome* 1 (Cambridge, 1998) 63. For another allusion to the rite in Latin poetry, see Fordyce at Catull. 64.47.

The duumvirs in charge of the sacred rites then celebrated the first lectisternium ever held in Rome, and for the space of eight days sacrificed to Apollo, to Latona and Diana, to Hercules, to Mercury and to Neptune, spreading three couches for them with all the splendour then available. They also observed the rite in their homes. All through the city, they say, doors stood wide open, all kinds of food were set out for universal consumption, all comers were welcomed, whether known or not, and men even exchanged kind and courteous words with personal enemies; there was a truce to quarrelling and litigation; even prisoners were loosed from their chains for those days, and they scrupled thereafter to imprison men whom the gods had thus befriended.[5]

This ritual is a response to plague and seeks to regain the favour of the gods by their invitation to a feast.[6] Couches are spread and their statues are set up in such a way as to seem to participate in the festivities. Their activity is thus conceived in strongly anthropomorphic terms. Three points may therefore be drawn from this. First, the tendency of the rite to invite the gods to eat as if they were human beings has some relationship with the Ovidian story where they actually seek to be taken for humans. Second, when Ovid refers to the employment of drapes not normally employed except on festal days, he may suggest that the hosts inadvertently replicate not just the modes of sacrifice typical of such days in general, but more specifically that particular mode of sacrificing to the gods as if they were dinner-guests which the *lectisternium* represents. Third, it is an important part of Livy's narrative of the rite that the symbolic feast set out for the gods in the temples is reflected in the private generosity of every house in Rome. All doors are open; all share their food freely with others; there is no discrimination between friend, enemy or even total stranger.[7] The Rome at the time of this rite is therefore the opposite of the meanly suspicious and unfriendly world, every door barred to outsiders, which the gods find everywhere apart from the house of Baucis and Philemon.[8] In both Livy and Ovid, the way that mortals treat gods (recognized or unrecognized) sets the pattern for how mortals should treat fellow mortals when they come to call.

Two conclusions may therefore be drawn. First, it is evident that the Latin of *Metamorphoses* 8.651–60 builds in an allusion to the rite of the *lectisternium*. Second, and more intriguingly, the behaviour rewarded in the tale of Baucis and Philemon is precisely that which is meant to filter down from the public rite to the home of the private citizen in the first *lectisternium*, while that which is punished is its polar

[5] Livy 5.13.6–8. For this first celebration, see also L. Calpurnius Piso Censorius fr. 25 Peter = fr. 32 Forsythe = Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 12.9. Ogilvie at Livy 5.13.7 is surely right to claim that Livy and Dionysius share a common source for this episode in Piso. However, his further claim that the 'Bank Holiday atmosphere' which Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 12.9.3 specifically attributes to Piso is 'false' because unrepresentative of other performances of the 'lectisternium' requires some refinement. For, while it is true to claim that elements such as the freeing of prisoners and the reception of strangers are characteristics of the Saturnalia and their Greek analogues (see esp. Athen. *Deipn.* 639b–640a), it is incorrect to treat 'lectisternium' and Saturnalia as entirely separate categories. See esp. Livy 22.1.18–20 where a 'lectisternium' is followed by a 'convivium publicum' which henceforth becomes an annual part of the celebration of the Saturnalia. Piso presumably retrojects this second-century employment of the 'lectisternium' rite to its putative first performance at the start of the fourth century. It is in turn this form of the 'lectisternium' which gives Ovid's allusion its point.

[6] Livy 5.13.4–5, 7.2.2–3, 7.27.1; Val. Max. 2.4.5; Aug. *De civ. Dei* 3.17.2.

[7] Cf. L. Calpurnius Piso Censorius fr. 25 Peter = fr. 32 Forsythe = Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 12.9 *καὶ ξένων τοὺς παρεπιδημοῦντας ὑποδεχόμενοι . . . ἀναπεπταμένων τῶν οἰκιῶν διὰ ἡμέρας τε καὶ νυκτός, καὶ δίχα κωλύσεως εἰσιόντων εἰς αὐτὰς τῶν βουλομένων.*

[8] Note esp. Ov. *Met.* 8.629: *mille domos clausere serae.*

opposite. Ovid does more than just play with the name of the ritual. He also thinks through its meaning.

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TACITUS, *ANNALS* 1.7.1–5*

In his essay 'Tacitus on Tiberius' Accession'[1] Tony Woodman offers a radical and to my mind largely convincing reassessment of Tacitus' account of the debate in the senate on 17 September and the events that led up to it. His principal conclusions about the debate itself may be summarized as follows. What Tacitus says about Tiberius' speech is that it was impressive but lacked credibility.[2] In it Tiberius, according to Tacitus, was at first suggesting that he himself should play no part at all in the future governance of the empire. But later in the debate, perhaps as a response to senatorial protests and lamentations, he made a concession by suggesting that he might be prepared to undertake some part of the total task, only to retract and withdraw once more to his original position.[3] The causes of delay catalogued by Tacitus in *Ann.* 1.7.6–7 refer to the period between Augustus' death and the accession debate, not to the debate itself and later.[4]

All this seems to me essentially right and to mark a major advance in our understanding of both Tacitus and Tiberius. The matter on which I wish to join issue with Woodman is his interpretation of *Ann.* 1.7.1–5.[5]

At Romae ruere in seruitium consules, patres, eques. quanto quis inlustrior, tanto magis falsi ac festinantes uultuque composito, ne laeti excessu principis neu tristiores primordio, lacrimas, gaudium, questus, adulationem miscebant. (2) Sex. Pompeius et Sex. Appuleius consules primi in uerba Tiberii Caesaris iurauere apudque eos Seius Strabo et C. Turranius, ille praetoriarum cohortium praefectus, hic annonae; mox senatus milesque et populus. (3) nam Tiberius cuncta per consules incipiebat, tamquam uetere re publica et ambiguus imperandi. ne edictum quidem quo patres in curiam uocabat nisi tribuniciae potestatis praescriptione posuit sub Augusto acceptae. (4) uerba edicti fuere pauca et sensu permodesto: de honoribus parentis consulturum, neque abscedere a corpore, idque unum ex publicis muneribus usurpare. (5) sed defuncto Augusto signum praetoriis cohortibus ut imperator dederat; excubiae, arma, cetera aulae; miles in forum, miles in curiam comitabatur. litteras ad exercitus tamquam adepto principatu misit, nusquam cunctabundus nisi cum in senatu loqueretur.

The crucial features of Woodman's view are as follows: (i) *nam Tiberius cuncta per consules incipiebat* (3) alludes to the motion of the consuls presented at the debate on 17 September and means something like 'Tiberius began his whole reign with the consuls'; the imperfect *incipiebat* is therefore not frequentative.[6] (ii) Since the whole thrust of Tacitus' narrative is to show that Tiberius was in fact *ambiguus imperandi*, that phrase must be separated from *tamquam*. Woodman therefore repunctuates as follows: *re publica; et, ambiguus imperandi, ne edictum quidem . . .*[7] (iii) *loqueretur* (5) is

* I am grateful to Tony Woodman and Bruce Gibson for their comments on a draft of this note. They should not be assumed to agree with the views expressed. The comments of *CQ*'s anonymous referee also inspired some improvements.

[1] A. J. Woodman, 'Tacitus on Tiberius' accession', in *Tacitus Reviewed* (Oxford, 1998), 40–69, with copious references to other modern scholarship, with which this note is not directly concerned.

[2] Ibid., 42ff. [3] Ibid., 46–7, 50ff. [4] Ibid., 56ff.

[5] Ibid., 53ff., 63ff. [6] Ibid., 64ff., with criticism of earlier views.

[7] Ibid., 67–8.