“UNCLE” VIRRO AND TREBIUS’ OFFSPRING: 
THE RELEVANCE OF JUVENAL SATIRES 5,
LINES 141-5

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Juvenal begins his fifth Satire with an exasperated condemnation of his friend Trebius, who is so enthralled by the prospect of a dinner at the table of his wealthy patron Virro that he fails to see that he is being cynically exploited:

*primo fige loco, quod tu discumbere iussus*
*mercedem solidam veterum capis officiorum.*
*fructus amicitiae magnae cibus ...* (12–14)

Get this straight from the outset: your invitation to recline at his table is all you’re getting in return for your past services. Food—that’s what your great “friendship” produces ... 

What is more, the meal itself will be used by his patron to humiliate him: the gross disparity between the fare served to Virro on the one hand and to Trebius on the other, as described by Juvenal from line 25 onwards, provides tangible proof of the extent to which the relationship between patron and client has been debased.

In the course of his description of the meal, the poet addresses an imaginary and deferential appeal to the host to dine with his clients as an equal: ‘solum/poscimus ut cenes civiliter’ (111–112); this, predictably, is immediately and contemptuously rebuffed by the serving of more lavish and exotic delicacies which are laid before Virro: goose liver, capon, boar and truffles, the sight of the latter prompting one of the host’s cronies to exclaim: ‘O Libya, keep your corn and unyoke your oxen—as long as you send us truffles’ (118–119). To intensify his resentment—‘ne qua indignatio absit’ (120)—Trebius will then have to observe the elaborate gestures of a specially trained carver who will dance attendance on Virro and his rich friends.

Trebius will not only feel excluded from the enjoyment of the fine fare; he will even be denied the right to exchange pleasantries with his patron:
duceris planta, velut ictus ab Hercule Cacus
et ponere foris, si quid temptaveris umquam
hiscere tamquam habeas tria nomina. quando propinat
Virro tibi summite tuis contacta labellis
pocula? quis vestrum temerarius usque adeo, quis
perditus, ut dicat regi 'bibe'? (125-130)

If you so much as dare to open your mouth—as if you have three names to your credit—you'll be dragged out by the heels and dumped outside, just as Cacus was when Hercules thumped him. When will Virro drink a toast to you or accept a goblet which your lips have touched? Which of you is so rash, so desperate as to say ‘cheers’ to His Majesty?

Juvenal concludes bitterly:

plurima sunt quae
non audent homines pertusa dicere laena. (130-131)

There are many things that dare not be said by people with holes in their cloaks.

The stark truth of the matter is that Trebius’ poverty presents an insurmountable barrier between him and the realisation of his dreams. But what if, by some miracle, Trebius were to become a rich man?

quadringenta tibi si quis deus aut similis dis
et melior fatis donaret homuncio, quantus
ex nihil, quantus fieres Virronis amicus!
‘da Trebio, pone ad Trebium. vis, frater, ab ipsis
ilibus?’ o nummi, vobis hunc praestat honorem,
vos estis frater. dominus tamen et domini rex
si vis tunc fieri, nullus tibi parvulus aula
luserit Aeneas nec filia dulcior illo.
iucundum et carum sterilis facit uxor amicum.
135
sed tua nunc Mycale pariat licet et puerus tres
in gremium patris fundat semel, ipse loquaci
gaudebit nido, viridem thoraca iubebit
adferri minimasque nuces assemque rogatum,
ad mensam quotiens parasitus venerit infans.
140

(Satire 5. 132-145)

If some god or just a man (a divine fellow, kinder than Fate) gave you four hundred ‘grand’, what a great person you’d become—from nothing! What a great friend of Virro’s you’d be! ‘Give some to Trebius, serve it to Trebius! How about a soupçon of loin, brother?’ Cash! It’s you that he’s showing respect to; it’s you who are his ‘brother’. But, then, if you’re aiming to be a big shot or a big shot’s boss, make sure there’s no little ‘Aeneas’ playing
in your ‘palace’—and no daughter that might outcharm him. A wife who can’t produce does produce delightful and dear friends.

But, as things are now, should your Mycale get in the family way and dump three baby boys in papa’s lap in one go, his Highness will cluck over the chirping brood; he’ll order the green jacket to be brought along, and little nuts and small change on request, whenever a baby ‘bumber’ pitches up at the table.

Virro’s apparently illogical indulgence of Trebius’ children in lines 141-145 raises the question of its precise relevance—if any—to its context: if Virro is caricatured as a scheming ‘captator’ lured by the wealth (and childlessness) of his client, why should he show delight at the sudden arrival of not one, but three, heirs who will minimize his chances of profiting? Virro’s behaviour is even more puzzling if we are meant to envisage Trebius, in the last five lines of the extract, in his real and impoverished state, rather than as the imaginary recipient of four hundred thousand sesterces from some divine or philanthropic benefactor.

The arguments in favour of viewing lines 141-5 as a return to reality are persuasive. ‘Nunc’ (line 141) seems quite clearly to be contrasted with ‘tunc’ (line 138), the latter referring to Trebius’ hypothetical wealthy circumstances. The contrast between the real and the imaginary is further emphasised by the juxtapositioning of the ‘improvident fecundity of the poor’ (‘pariat’, ‘in gremio ... fundat’) and the loftier associations of the Vergilian reference in lines 138-9. Indeed, the very name ‘Mycale’—immediately suggestive of foreign and, most likely, freedwoman status—may have been intended to underscore the contrast between the ‘Dido’ of the fantasy and Trebius’ real abandoned ‘coniunx’, mentioned in line 77 of the same satire.

Nonetheless, the possibility that Mycale may be the name of a slave or of a ‘libertina’ prompted Friedländer to interpret lines 141-5 in a way which makes some sense of Virro’s apparently anomalous behaviour: if Mycale was not the ‘coniunx’ of line 77 but a ‘concubina’ her children would have no legal claim on Trebius’ estate. Not only would they present no serious obstacle to Virro’s designs, but they would also provide him with a means of ingratiating himself with their father. This interpretation, however, presupposes that Trebius at line 141 is still being envisaged as the imaginary recipient of four hundred thousand sesterces—in other words, as a person sufficiently wealthy to warrant Virro’s greedy attention. It also requires that ‘nunc’ (line 141) should still refer to Trebius’ hypothetical role as a rich man in a childless marriage. Yet, for the reasons given above, this construction seems the less likely: lines 141-5 bring us back to the ‘stern reality’ of Trebius’ state. There are other reasons, persuasive rather than conclusive, which weigh against Friedländer’s theory: is it likely
that Trebius would have kept up two households or is it feasible that he would flout law and convention by having his ‘coniunx’ and ‘concubina’ living under the same roof? Finally, if Juvenal is indeed saying that Virro would be astute enough to capitalize on the legal disadvantages of illegitimate children vis-à-vis the laws of inheritance, it is expressed in a rather abstruse manner: is the reader intended instantly to recognize the name ‘Mycale’ as unequivocally denoting a concubine rather than a married woman of humble class?

A rejection of Friedländer’s theory does not make a coherent interpretation of lines 132-145 any easier. One may be tempted, like Duff, to dismiss lines 141-5 as ‘strikingly irrelevant’ and to refer to the frequency of such irrelevance in Juvenal’s writings. Other commentators have attempted to see an underlying logic. Ferguson, for example, citing Augustus’ ‘ius trium liberorum’ which granted special privileges to those with three children, maintains that this would have made it worth Virro’s while to keep Trebius as a ‘cliens’. However, while the Augustan legislation did grant a number of privileges to those who qualified, it is difficult to explain why Trebius should have remained an attractive target for Virro’s attentions: quite simply, his chances of securing a substantial inheritance would have been all but nullified by the sudden arrival of three legitimate heirs. Childlessness on the part of the ‘testator’ was obviously a prime, if not essential, recommendation in the eyes of a ‘captator’, as stressed by Juvenal in line 140.

Furthermore, Virro’s predicament would probably have been compounded by another provision of the law, which granted husbands and wives the right to inherit from one another (‘inter virum et uxorem capacitas’).

If one is correct in assuming that Juvenal is talking about Trebius in his actual, impoverished state, it is even more puzzling why Virro should continue to court his favour. Morford attempts to counter this difficulty by arguing that ‘Virro can afford to give worthless trifles to Trebius’ children, because he knows that is all he will have to give, Trebius has little to leave and that little will go to his children, so that there is no opportunity there for Virro as ‘captator’. Barr, on the other hand, interprets Juvenal as saying: ‘But since you are poor, if your wife has children Virro will ingratiat什么意思自己为他们置办一些便宜的小礼物，带着将新一辈的寄生虫们训练长大的意图。在类似的程度上，Jenkyns maintains that ‘Virro corrupts not just Trebius himself but his very children’ and draws attention to the distasteful connotations of the phrase ‘parasitus infans’.

Barr and Jenkyns provide attractive explanations of Virro’s seemingly enigmatic behaviour; but I would suggest that the ultimate target of this little cameo is Trebius himself, whose apparent inability to recognize his own degrading subservience and gullibility so distresses Juvenal—a theme
which marks the opening of the satire and one which is given vivid expression at the conclusion:

\[
\begin{align*}
si \text{ te propositi nondum pudet atque eadem est mens,} \\
\text{ut bona summa putes aliena vivere quadra,} \\
si \text{ potes illa pati quae nec Sarmentus iniquas} \\
\text{ Caesaris ad mensas nec vilis Gabba tulisset,} \\
\text{quamvis iurato metuam tibi credere testi.} \\
\end{align*}
\] (1-5)

If you’re still not ashamed of your intention and still convinced that there’s nothing better than scavenging a living off someone else’s hunk of bread, if you can endure what neither Sarmentus nor worthless Gabba would have put up with at Caesar’s graded dinner-parties, I’ll be nervous of trusting you as a witness—even on oath.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ille sapit, qui te sit utitur. omnia ferre} \\
si \text{ potes, et debes. pulsandum vertice raso} \\
praebebis quandoque caput nec dura timebis \\
\text{flagra pati, his epulis et tali dignus amico.} \\
\end{align*}
\] (170-5)

The man is being shrewd when he treats you like that. If you can put up with all those insults, then you deserve them. The time is coming when you’ll be inviting your shaven head to be cuffed and you won’t flinch at a hard thrashing—quite in keeping with this sort of dinner and this type of ‘friend’.

The incongruity of Virro’s treatment of Trebius’ children is striking: he appears to be eschewing the ‘normal’ behaviour of a cynically calculating ‘captator’ by ‘playing uncle’\(^{16}\) to the wheedling children of an indigent client. The main point of lines 141-5 is surely to confront Trebius with an image which neatly parallels his own situation: like his imaginary parasitic children, Trebius is both grasping and easily seduced by inexpensive treats handed out by a calculating patron. Implicit too, perhaps, is Virro’s awareness that Trebius will be captivated by this rare display of bonhomie\(^{17}\) and show of affection towards the children, in the same way as he is enthralled by the aroma of his patron’s kitchen:

\[
\begin{align*}
tu \text{ tibi liber homo et regis conviva videris:} \\
captum te nidore suae putat ille culinae, \\
nec male coniectat \ldots \\
\end{align*}
\] (161-3)

In your eyes you’re a free person and the guest of a king: but he reckons that you’re a prisoner of the smell of his kitchen—and he’s dead right.

Perhaps we have been as blind as Trebius in not realizing this!
NOTES


2. Courtney (above, n.1) 248.

3. The precise form of the name is not clear, the manuscripts offering variously ‘mycale’, ‘mygale’, ‘Migale’ (‘Megale’ conjectured by Buecheler). See J.R.C. Martyn, *D. Iuni Juvenalis Saturae*, Amsterdam 1987, 36. Ferguson, (above, n.1) 182, suggests that the name is perhaps the Jewish ‘Michal’. There is no reason why Trebius, an obviously humble citizen, should not have married a freedwoman; see Duff (above, n.1) 198 and Courtney (above n.1) 248.

4. ‘scilicet hoc fuerat, propter quod saepe relicta/ coniuge per montem adversum gelidasque cucurri/ Esquilias ’ (76–8).


6. Ferguson (above n.1) 182.

7. See Duff (above n.1) 198. ‘Ad mensam quotiens parasitus venerit infans’ suggests that the children will enjoy the close company of their father and be ‘part of the family’, as it were.

8. Duff (above n.1) 198, draws attention to inscriptions containing similar foreign names (Cedne, Dorcas, Sabbathis, Samne) with ‘Claudia’ prefixed, i.e. freedwomen who adopted the name of their patron.

9. Above n.1, 198; cf. Courtney (above n.1) 247, who describes the digression as ‘not fully relevant’.

10. Above n.1, 182.

11. Apart from being able to receive bequests in full, fathers of three children could claim exemption from public charges and from guardianship to which they were called by law (‘tutela legitima’). Women in particular stood to benefit in terms of this legislation: a freeborn woman with three children and a freedwoman with four were freed from guardianship (‘tutela mulierum’) and had the right of succession to the inheritance of their children. See A. Berger, *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Roman Law* (New Series—Vol. 43, Part 2), Philadelphia 1953, 530 and 553–4. If Trebius’ Mycale were a freeborn woman, Juvenal’s reference to three children could be particularly significant in stressing Virro’s diminished chances of securing a legacy. Elsewhere Juvenal shows his awareness of the benefits afforded by this legislation: ‘iam pater es, dedimus quod famae opposere possis./ iura parentis habes, propter me scriberis heres,/ legatum omne capis nec non et dulce caducum/ commoda praeterea iungentur multa caducis,/ si numerum, si tres implevero . . .’ (*Sat. 9*. 86–90).


16. It is commonly assumed that the nature of Virro’s gifts to the children is in keeping with his mean treatment of the less important dinner-guests, but this need not be
the case. One could argue that the gifts are quite normal and acceptable treats which would appeal to a young child. Whatever the 'thorax viridis' may be (see Courtney, above n.1, 248), it does not obviously carry connotations of 'stinginess'; on the contrary, the words 'iubebit/ adferri' (141–3) almost suggest a scene of eager anticipation on the part of the young boy, as the arrival of the 'thorax' is awaited. Probably Virro is playing on the child's enthusiasm for the races, by presenting him or by allowing him to play with a miniature green racing jacket; if so, a relief showing a young boy in a miniature chariot is of some interest (see U.E. Paoli, Rome: Its People, Life and Customs, London 1975, plate 43). It is perhaps significant for the present context that in Satire 11, lines 193–201, Juvenal attests the extraordinary popularity of the 'green team'. Similarly, the word 'minimas' (144) may not be indicative of meanness but merely descriptive of the size of the nut commonly used in children's games. In other words, what Juvenal may be showing here is Virro's astuteness in pandering to a child's whims with exactly the sort of treat that would appeal to him. Such an interpretation, at any rate, is more in keeping with 'ipse loquaci/ gaudebit nido' (142–3)—however insincere the latter may be.

17. Trebius' yearning for humane treatment by his patron is made quite clear in his imaginary appeal to Virro:

... solum
poscimus ut cenes civiliter. hoc face et esto,
esto, ut nunc multi, dives tibi, pauper amicis. (110–13)
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