

BIPEDES UOLUCRES IN NAEVIUS' *LYCURGUS**

Abstract: The article discusses the meaning of the expression *bipedes uolucres* in Naevius' *Lycurgus* (fr. 18 Schauer). Traditionally, it has been taken to mean "two-legged birds" and was thought to refer to maenads captured by soldiers. This interpretation, however, presupposes that Naevius constructed a bizarre or even clumsy figure of speech. In my paper, I propose an alternative interpretation of the word *uolucres*. Accordingly, the fragment is about "two-legged pests of vines", that is "human beings hostile to vines". As such, it should refer to Lycurgus, the main hero of the tragedy, who was notorious for his attempt to cut down the newly introduced vines.

Keywords: Roman tragedy, Naevius, Greek myth, *Lycurgus*, Dionysus

After much thought Snowball declared that the Seven Commandments could in effect be reduced to a single maxim, namely: "Four legs good, two legs bad." This, he said, contained the essential principle of Animalism. Whoever had thoroughly grasped it would be safe from human influences. The birds at first objected, since it seemed to them that they also had two legs, but Snowball proved to them that this was not so.

"A bird's wing, comrades," he said, "is an organ of propulsion and not of manipulation. It should therefore be regarded as a leg. The distinguishing mark of man is the HAND, the instrument with which he does all his mischief."

The birds did not understand Snowball's long words, but they accepted his explanation ...

G. Orwell, Animal Farm

Under the lemma *inlicere*, explained as an equivalent of *inlaquere*, the grammarian Nonius transmitted to us a fragment of Naevius' *Lycurgus*¹ printed by Warmington in his Loeb Edition

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1) Warmington, Spaltenstein 30–2, Schauer 18, Lattanzi 5; in Nonii Compendiosa Doctrina CD 10 L.

(1936) and by Spaltenstein in his recent edition of dramatic fragments of Naeuius (2014) in the following form:²

alii
sublime in altos saltus inlicite . . .
ubi bipedes uolucres lino linquant lumina

In order to exemplify what can be taken as a traditional reading of the passage, let me quote Warmington's translation:

Go, others of you, lure them up on high
 To lofty glades, . . . wherein these hopping birds
 In flaxen toils may leave the light of day

Before proceeding any further, some general remarks should be made. What is certain is that the passage must contain a form of the verb *inlicio*³ and its meaning should be close to "take in a snare, enmesh, entangle" (OLD s. v. *illaqueo*). This is very helpful in face of the fact that, unlike what is printed as the last line of the fragment, the initial part of it has been reconstructed in a variety of ways, none of which seems to be unproblematic. Most likely, it contains at least one lacuna,⁴ owing to which a complement of the verb *inlicite* is missing. In spite of this difficulty, virtually no scholar doubts

2) Quite recently, two priceless books have appeared: TGF (= Schauer 2012) and Spaltenstein's monumental *Commentaire des fragments dramatiques de Naeuius* (2014), in which fragments of the *Lycurgus* are discussed over almost 100 pages (423–519). Unfortunately, a little more difficult to find, but no less helpful, is the commentary of Lattanzi published in *Aevum Antiquum* in 1994. Important works on this tragedy include: Klusmann 1843, 107–27; Ribbeck 1875, 55–61; Warmington 1936, 122–35; Deichgräber 1939, 256–65; Marmorale 1953, 191–8; Pastorino 1957, 35–59; Mette 1964, 51–4; Ferrin Sutton 1971; Boyle 2006, 42–9.

3) According to Onions (1895), the verb should represent the fourth rather than third conjugation and, accordingly, the lemma should also be changed from *inlicere* into *inlicire*. This conjecture, which has not been universally accepted, does not affect the meaning of the verb, which is given by Nonius in an explicit manner. For discussion, see Spaltenstein 2014, § 1222.

4) Thus Lattanzi 1994, ad loc. Unlike Warmington 1936 and Ribbeck 1968, he places it after *saltus*. Another lacuna may follow the initial *alii*.

that the passage is about luring maenads to some kind of a trap in order to capture them.⁵

Such an interpretation makes commentators think that *bipedes uolucres*, “two-legged birds”, is a figure of speech, which stands for “maenads”.⁶ This, however, may be disturbing for two reasons. Firstly, it can be objected on the grounds that maenads probably did not die in nets. Instead, as it seems, they were taken prisoner and brought on stage, where they appeared as a chorus.⁷ Secondly, such a metaphor as a “two-legged bird” seems really clumsy if not completely absurd. After all, if a human being is spoken of metaphorically as a bird, the figure should be constructed by means of attributing to the animal some features that would be perceived as unusual.⁸ For instance, a person may be described as a wingless bird. On the other hand, given that real birds (outside of Snowball's dialectics) have two legs, calling a bird *bipes* does not transform it into anything closer to a human than to a bird.⁹

A possible solution to this problem may be that the metaphor of “bird” as a “maenad” was in common usage. If this were so, the noun *uolucres* on its own would be enough to evoke “maenads”. In such a case, the adjective *bipedes* would not be meant to modify the meaning of the noun by attributing a typically human feature to its designation. However, the strongest argument in favour of such an interpretation is that in Euripides' *Bacchae* 748, maenads are compared to birds.¹⁰ This single instance of a poetic text in which A is likened to B is not enough to substantiate the claim that in other

5) Thus: Ribbeck 1875, ad loc.; Warmington 1936, ad loc.; Deichgräber 1939, 258; Marmorale 1953, ad loc.; Mette 1964, 54; Lattanzi 1994, ad loc.; Boyle 2006, 43; Spaltenstein 2014, ad loc. Klussmann (1843, ad loc.) seems to have been the last scholar to think that the person spoken of in the passage could have been Lycurgus, in his version, assaulted by the Furies. Alternatively, Klussmann suggested that *uolucres* could refer to maenads.

6) It seems that Düntzer (1837, 433–4) was the last scholar who thought that *uolucres* were real birds.

7) Ribbeck 1875, 59; Warmington 1936, 123; Boyle 2006, 42.

8) See especially Arist. *Poet.* 1457b.

9) A cat that barks is a dog, but a four-legged cat is simply a cat.

10) Thus, already Klussmann 1843, ad loc. Interestingly, Dodds, in his commentary on *Bacchae* (1960, ad loc.), refers to the fragment of Naevius under discussion as a parallel.

contexts a word that means A can refer to B. More importantly, this interpretation does not explain the role of the adjective *bipedes*. If it was not supposed to modify the meaning of *uolucres*, perhaps it should be taken as an epithet with an ornamental function.¹¹ This, however, would be quite bewildering. After all, the fact of having two legs, although not surprising in case of birds and maenads, is hardly among their salient features, and it certainly does not render the style of the passage more elevated or dignified. Thus, Spaltenstein (§ 1228), while being convinced that the word *bipedes* was meant to evoke a typically human feature, suggested that its function could be intentionally humorous, given that the lines under discussion could be spoken by Lycurgus, who mocked maenads in this way.¹² Again, however, it seems that calling someone a “two-legged bird” is not a really effective way of expressing one’s hostility or distaste. Such a clumsiness can be explained away as a result of the author’s incapacity. It can be also passed over in silence if we manage to suspend our aesthetic judgement while approaching a text of an admittedly distant culture. At any rate, however, a sensation that we are dealing with a kind of poetry that is inaccessible to us persists, unless we allow for a possibility that its literary meaning was different than it is usually thought.

Fortunately, the above interpretation is not the only option, given that the form *uolucres* may represent at least three different lexemes: an adjective *uolucer*, *-cris*, *-cre* (“winged”), a noun *uolucris*, *-is*, which designates a “winged creature” such as a “bird”, and, finally, *uolucra*, *-ae*. The latter has an irregular form of a plural nominative attested in Columella 10.333: *uolucres*.¹³ As the same author describes it (de arb. 15), *genus est animalis, uolucra appellatur; id fere praerodit teneros adhuc pampinos et uuas* (“there is a kind of

11) Alternatively, as Wormington’s translation quoted above suggests (“hopping birds”), the focus on maenads’ legs can be thought of as intended to add something to their characteristics, namely, that they move fast. However, the word *bipes* does not mean ‘hopping’, nor does it seem to connote swiftness of movement in its other occurrences.

12) Lycurgus was notorious for verbal aggression. See Soph. Ant. 961: *ψάωω τὸν θεὸν ἐν κερτομίῳις γλώσσαις*.

13) In spite of long ū, in Columella, the word is scanned as *uōlŭcrēs*, which makes it a likely substitute for the form of the noun *uolucris*.

animal, which is called *uolucra*. It usually gnaws tender vine-shoots and grapes").¹⁴ With all likelihood, this animal should be identified as a caterpillar of one or several butterfly species.¹⁵ Now, given that caterpillars have many legs, it seems that an expression "two-legged caterpillar" is a much better metaphor than "two-legged bird".

What would be the meaning of such a figure of speech? Perhaps unexpectedly, this is where it all becomes logical. *Volucra* is described as a pest of vine. Two-legged *uolucra* can be a name for a human who destroys vines. This is exactly what the main hero of Naevius' tragedy is notorious for. Lycurgus was one of the mythical enemies of Dionysus / Liber, who not only opposed the god, but also tried to cut down the newly introduced vine, obviously to an effect detrimental to himself.¹⁶

Although at first glance it may seem unexpected, such an interpretation is corroborated by external data. Most notably, according to ps.-Apollodorus (3.5.1), whose narration is generally believed to contain a summary of some tragedy, perhaps that of Aeschylus, most likely adapted by Naevius, the story of Lycurgus ends in the following way:¹⁷

ὁ δὲ μεμηνῶς Δρύαντα τὸν παῖδα, ἀμπέλου νομίζων κλῆμα κόπτειν, πελέκει πλήξας ἀπέκτεινε, καὶ ἀκρωτηριάσας αὐτὸν ἐσωφρόνησε. τῆς δὲ γῆς ἀκάρπου μενούσης, ἔχρησεν ὁ θεὸς καρποφορήσειν αὐτήν, ἂν θανατωθῆι Λυκούργος. Ἦδωνοὶ δὲ ἀκούσαντες εἰς τὸ Παργαῖον αὐτὸν ἀπαγαγόντες ὄρος ἔδησαν, κάκει κατὰ Διονύσου βούλησιν ὑπὸ ἵππων διαφθαρεῖς ἀπέθανε.

In his frenzy he killed Dryas, his son, striking him with an axe, convinced that he was cutting a vine-twig. Having mutilated the boy, he came to his senses. As the land became sterile, the god prophesized that it will become fertile again once Lycurgus is put to death. Having heard that, Edonoi led him away to Mount Pangaion, where they bound him, and by the will of Dionysus, he died mutilated by horses.

14) The text of Rodgers, Oxford ed. 2010.

15) See Beavis 1988, 132–6.

16) Lycurgus cuts down vines in Apollod. 3.34–5; Plut. 15e; AP 16.127; 9.79; 9.561; Cornutus, ND 62; Heraclit. All. 35. Latin sources: Propert. 3.17.23; Verg. Ge. 4.329–32; Hyg. Fab. 132; Serv. ad Aen. 3.14; Sch. Lucan 1.574–6; Schol. Hor. C. 2.19.16; Sch. Ov. Ibis 345–6; I Myth. Vat. 2.18.9; II Myth. Vat. 94.

17) See e. g. Ribbeck 1875, 56; West 1990, 26.

Apart from the reference to cutting down the vine, the passage contains at least two valuable pieces of information. We learn from it that:

1) Lycurgus was taken by his subjects to the mountains. This corresponds to the first part of the Naevius fragment, in which a reference to some elevated places is made (in spite of textual problems that involve the word *sublime* / *sublimen* and *alios* / *altos*, such a reference can be taken for granted). The verb *inlicite* connotes an artifice, which means that Lycurgus was not dragged by force. Instead, his fate could resemble that of Pentheus, who was lured to the mountains.

2) In the mountains, Lycurgus was bound. According to many, especially late versions, he was overcome by the vine.¹⁸ This corresponds to *lino*.

The last two words of the fragment, *linquant lumina* are usually taken as another figure of speech, whose meaning would be that of “leaving the light of the Sun”, that is, “to die”. This is not unlikely and seems to correspond to the death of Lycurgus mentioned by ps.-Apollodorus. However, there is another explanation of it: according to Homer (Il. 6.135), Lycurgus was blinded before he died. We do not know whether the dramatic version of the story included this detail, but it is tempting to think that it did. If this were the case, the word *lumina* could be used here in a meaning, which is very common in poetry: “eyes” or “eyesight” (OLD s. v. *lumen* 9). Thus, *linquere lumina* can simply mean: “to lose one’s eyesight”.

By combining these elements, whose new interpretation I would like to suggest, the meaning of the fragment could be the following:

You others, lure [him] to the ravines elevated in height, where the worms that destroy vine shall lose their eyesight in bonds.

18) Thus, especially Nonnus, Dion. 21.1–161; Hymn to Dionysus (P. Ross. Georg. 1.11): 47–9; Luc. DDeor. 18.1; within his rationalized version of the story, Diodoros of Sicily (3.65.5) speaks of impalement or crucifixion (*ἀνασταυρώω*). In Latin: Stat. Theb. 4.386; 7.180; Lucan, B. C. 3.429–34 with schol. ad 431 Endt; Val. Fl. 1.726–9. See also LIMC: Lykourgos I 35, 41, 42, 43, 51, 70–81. See also Casali 2005.

Quite obviously, this interpretation raises questions regarding the identity of the speaker. Certainly, these lines should not be attributed to Lycurgus, as most editors did. More likely, they were spoken by a person who communicated the prophecy mentioned by ps.-Apollodorus (ἔχρησεν ὁ θεός), perhaps Apollo himself, or his spokesman of some kind (Orpheus?).¹⁹

The last question is whether the new interpretation of the fragment can be accepted in the light of the existing (and very tentative) reconstructions of the play. Perhaps it may, at a cost of some minor alterations. However, it may be taken as a suggestion that a serious revision of our understanding of Naevius' *Lycurgus* and, indeed (by way of a snowball effect), of the whole dramatic tradition of the Lycurgus myth (which includes, most notably, Aeschylus) is necessary.²⁰

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19) Orpheus was one of the characters of Aeschylus' *Lycurgeia*, as results from ps.-Eratosthenes' *Catasterism* 24. The role of Apollo in the story of Lycurgus is far from obvious, but his involvement seems to be hinted at in two of its representations in vase painting: LIMC, *Lykourgos* I 27 and 28. The former features a laurel tree, the latter Apollo himself. It is also of certain importance that ps.-Apollodorus (3.35.6) says ἔχρησεν ὁ θεός. It seems that when he mentions an oracle without specifying which one he means (like in 2.43.7: Ἄμμωνος δὲ χρήσαντος), by default he refers to that of Apollo in Delphi: 1.84.5; 1.107.3 (cf. *Pi P.* 4.73–4); 1.110.6 (cf. *AR* 209); 3.48.3.

20) I intend to offer it in my forthcoming book.

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Warsaw

Bartłomiej Bednarek