

Persius, *Prologus 6: Semipaganus*

I suspect that more pages have been written on *semipaganus* than on any other single word in Persius. Not only is the meaning of *paganus* obscure – fellow-townsman? rustic? civilian? – it is far from obvious what the implied other half is. This is a problem with other *semi-* compounds. A *semivir* is obviously half a man, but whether the other half is a beast or a woman or a boy or an inanimate object depends on the context: Ovid might have called the Minotaur a *semivir bos* or a *semibos vir* or a *semivir semibos* (calling him *semibovemque virum, semivirumque bovem* in A.A. 2.24 was just overkill) but a simple *semivir* or *semibos*, without further clues in the context, would have left his readers scratching their heads.

I lean towards the (familiar) idea that the *pagus* of which Persius is a partial member is Poetopolis, and that he is claiming to be half a poet and (presumably) half a prosaic writer of philosophical diatribe. Satiric and choliambic verse are certainly prosier than most genres, and putting philosophy into verse, as Lucretius did, will also tend to prosify it. Did Persius think of himself as a Stoic Lucretius? Or perhaps a Semilucretius, omitting Stoic physics and writing only on ethics? He certainly sounds Lucretian in 1.1. However, this is a huge subject, best put off for another day.

In the mean time, whatever *semipaganus* means, it certainly implies that Persius is half one thing, and half something else. Given Persius’ intimate knowledge of all Horace’s works, and his thorough reworking of the *Sermones*, I wonder: can it possibly be coincidental that the only ‘Persius’ mentioned in any of Horace’s works is a *hybrida*, the pun-loving Clazomenian halfbreed of *Sermones* 1.7?¹

What Gowers says about Horace’s Persius in her recent commentary on *Satires* I (CGLC, 2012) sounds rather like the Neronian satirist: “this rancid legal pickle of bitter flavours . . . The poem can be read as a literary-critical duel between two old kinds of satire, [Persius’] the Greek-influenced wit of Lucilius, sharp but uncontrolled, and

¹ If no one (so far as I know) has noticed the connection between the satirist Persius and his Horatian forebear, that may be because *Satire* 1.7 is everyone’s least favorite poem of Horace, except for possibly Epodes 8 and 12.

[Rex's] the rustic and vinegary humour of Italy" (250). Was Persius inspired by 'Persius'? Some may also wish to associate Horace's Rupilius Rex with Persius' supposed *Mida rex* or even Nero, but I'm not sure I'm willing to go so far.

As it happens, Persius' other model Lucilius also mentions only one 'Persius' in the surviving bits of his satires, in two passages of what seems to have been his first published poem. We know that Book XXVI was his first collection of satires, placed after the hexameter works by officious editors. If Warmington and Krenkel are right in putting lines 632-4 W (= 591-3 K = 595-6 Marx) in the first satire of Book XXVI, then Lucilius stakes out his poetical position in his very first satire as midway between the tastes of the overlearned Persius and the underlearned Manius Manilius:

<ab indoctissimis>
nec doctissimis <legi me>; Man<i>um Manil>iump
Persiumve haec legere nolo, Iunium Congum volo.

Different editors print different supplements, but *Persium* is outside them, and the general sense seems clear. Again, he says (Fr. 635 W = 594 K = 593 M)

Persium non curo legere, Laelium Decumum volo.

(We know from Cicero, who quotes this line, that Persius was the overlearned reader.) Is Persius the satirist thinking of Lucilius' Persius when he writes his snobbish rejections of the common herd and professes that he doesn't care whether anyone read him?

Of course, my second point is less compelling than my first. We have only a small percentage of Lucilius' works, so he may have mentioned this Persius or others many times in passages now lost. My first point is much stronger. We have no reason to believe that Horace wrote any lost works except for juvenilia that he did not wish to survive. It seems likely that his single 'Persius' caught the satirist Persius' eye and influenced his work.