

UMBRICIUS AND THE FROGS (JUVENAL, SAT. 3.44–5)¹

quid Romae faciam? mentiri nescio; librum,
si malus est, nequeo laudare et poscere; motus
astrorum ignoro; funus promittere patris
nec uolo nec possum; ranarum uiscera numquam
inspexi; ferre ad nuptam quae mittit adulter,
quae mandat, norunt alii; me nemo ministro
fur erit, atque ideo nulli comes exeo tamquam
mancus et extinctae corpus non utile dextrae.
quis nunc diligitur nisi conscius et cui feruens
aestuat occultis animus semperque tacendis?

Juvenal 3.41–50

In Satire 3, Umbricius states his intention to leave Rome and delivers a long explanation of his decision, an explanation which develops into an invective against life in Rome. In the lines quoted above, Umbricius lists the ‘skills’ which (he implies) are essential for success at Rome, ‘skills’ which he does not possess.² The list³ comprises various mendacious, nefarious and criminal activities; Umbricius’ stated inability to undertake such activities reinforces his claim to be a simple, honourable man (e.g. lines 21–2). In this list is his claim ‘I have never examined frogs’ entrails’. *TLL* glosses this passage ‘(sc. ueneni indagandi gratia)’ (*TLL inspicio* 1951.70), the view taken by Friedländer too (‘zur Bereitung von Gift’). Courtney takes a different view: ‘Presumably not for poisoning, which *inspicere* would hardly suit, but of divination...of an oriental type.’

Is the reference here to poisoning or to divination?⁴ Parts of frogs and toads were undoubtedly used in poisoning.⁵ Yet *inspicio* is a word suited to divination and often found in such contexts: *TLL inspicio* 1951.59ff.; cf. *TLL exta* 1965.4–8 for examples

¹ Deep thanks are due to Barbara Bell, whose astute questioning caused me to take a fresh look at this passage; to Duncan Cloud for helpful comments on a earlier draft; and to Professor Nisbet for providing most fruitful suggestions on the earlier draft.

² Expressed in an amazing variety, without repetition, of negative words and of words denoting inability: *nescio, nequeo, ignoro, nec uolo nec possum, numquam, norunt alii, nemo, nulli, non*.

³ A typical satirical (see A. Kernan, *The Cankered Muse* (New Haven, 1959), pp. 7–8) and Juvenalian technique, used especially often in this poem. Other lists in Satire 3 include disgusting jobs (30–3), eastern imports (63–6), places from where Greeks come to Rome (69–70), the roles a Greek can assume (76–8), the forms of flattery and ingratiation practised by Greeks (86–91, resumed 100–8), the nouveaux riches who take the prestigious seats at the theatre (155–8), the list of the poor man’s possessions (203–7), the list of presents given to the rich man (215–20) and the list of objects which strike the pedestrian as he makes his way through the crowded streets (244–6).

⁴ More precisely, to haruspicy, inspection of entrails: on which see G. Luck, *Arcana Mundi* (Baltimore and London, 1985), pp. 251–2.

⁵ As at Juv. 1.70 and Prop. 3.6.27, as Courtney says, also Juv. 6.659. For the poisons produced from frogs and toads see Pliny, *N.H.* 11.196, 280 and 25.123.

of *exta inspicere*; e.g. Cic. *Div.* 1.131 'Democritus autem censet sapienter instituisse ueteres, ut hostiarum immolatarum inspicerentur exta'. In fact, this quotation from Cicero indicates that the animals which were subjected to scrutiny by diviners were sacrificial victims. Another passage from Juvenal (6.549–52) suggests the sorts of sacrificial victims which a diviner might examine:

calidae pulmone columbae
tractato Armenius uel Commagenus haruspex;
pectora pullorum rimabitur, exta catelli
interdum et pueri; faciet quod deferat ipse.

The sacrificial victims mentioned here can be paralleled in other sources and are especially associated with eastern sacrificial practice,⁶ which perhaps suits the association with oriental diviners in this passage. However, they seem to be unusual objects for the attention of *haruspices*, especially the climax to the list, the boy (*puer*), which seems to be a case of hyperbole, as shown by the comment that the diviner will turn informer against himself for his crime (of human sacrifice).⁷

Frogs, however, do not fall into the same category. They are never mentioned as sacrificial victims in Cicero's *De Divinatione*; in fact, Cicero's only mention of frogs in that work is as weather-prophets, when they foretell rain by croaking.⁸ Moreover, Kadletz, in his comprehensive survey of sacrificial victims mentioned in surviving Greek and Roman texts, records no occurrence of frogs as sacrificial victims.⁹

Yet it seems clear that the preceding lines provide a cogent build-up to a reference to divination. First, Umbricius claims that he cannot lie or praise a bad book or ask for a copy of it – all examples of mendacity. Then he claims that he is no astrologer (*motus / astrorum ignoro*) predicting the day of an individual's death (*funus promittere patris / nec uolo nec possum*),¹⁰ an activity which was not only looked upon with deep

⁶ Doves: Ov. *Fast.* 1.451–2 (in Cyprus); puppies: Paus. 3.14.9; Plut. *Mor.* 290d (in Sparta); chickens: Sen. *N.Q.* 4B.6.2 (a story set in the Peloponnese); the sacred chickens at Rome (*OLD pullus* 1c) were also used for prophecy but on the basis of their behaviour, not their entrails.

⁷ A *senatus consultum* of 97 B.C. prohibiting human sacrifice (Plin. *N.H.* 30.12) suggests that human sacrifice was thought to occur in the Roman Empire at that time. Cf. Cic. *Font.* 31 for human sacrifice attributed to the Gauls. The sacrifice of a baby or child was 'a commonplace of accusation': see R. MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 335, of which a good example is Philostr., *Vit. Apoll.* 8.7.12, 15.

⁸ Cicero cites these lines from his translation of Aratus' *Diosemeia*:

uos quoque signa uidetis, aquai dulcis alumnae,
cum clamore paratis inanis fundere uoces
absurdoque sono fontis et stagna cietis,

then comments: 'quis est qui ranunculos hoc uidere suspicari possit? sed inest in ranunculis uis et natura quaedam significans aliquid per se ipsa satis certa, cognitioni autem hominum obscurior' (*Div.* 1.15). This is a motif taken over from Aratus 946–7 (following [Theophrastus], *De Sign. Tempest.* 15) and later appearing in Virgil, *Georg.* 1.378 and Plin. *N.H.* 18.361. Cf. Cicero again in *Att.* 15.16a: 'equidem etiam pluuias metuo, si Prognostica nostra uera sunt; ranae enim ῥητορεύουσιν.'

⁹ E. Kadletz, *Animal Sacrifice in Greek and Roman Religion* (1976; Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington). Thanks are due to my colleague Richard Seaford for referring me to this work.

¹⁰ Professor Nisbet points out in a letter that *funus* here refers to natural death, not murder, as at 6.565–8:

consulit ictericae lento de funere matris,
ante tamen de te Tanaquil tua, quando sororem
efferat et patruos, an sit uicturus adulter
post ipsam: quid enim maius dare numina possunt?

suspicion but was also illegal.¹¹ So how do the frogs' entrails fit in? *ranarum uiscera numquam inspexi* is, in effect, an explanatory gloss on the previous statement (therefore a colon, not a semi-colon, should be printed after *possum*). This explanatory gloss delivers a savage jibe at diviners, a jibe which functions by substituting for conventional victims such as sheep the surprising and lowly frogs.¹² The gist of what Umbricius sneeringly says is, 'I've never been one of those back-street sooth-sayers who predict relatives' deaths using cheap animals in place of proper sacrificial victims.' Possibly one could go still further and suggest that *ranarum* is a satirical exaggeration of the kind of small animal used by the bogus practitioners of the art of divination whom Umbricius so deeply scorns.

A moment's consideration of ancient literature reveals the comic and satiric potential of frogs. We need hardly do more than refer to Aristophanes' *Frogs* in which the chorus of frogs in the Underworld competes with Dionysus.¹³ That Juvenal himself was aware of the comic possibilities of frogs is suggested by their only other appearance in the *Satires*, an appearance itself inspired (in part) by Aristophanes, at the end of the previous poem (2.149–52):

esse aliquos manes et subterranea regna,
Cocytum et Stygio ranas in gurgite nigras,
atque una transire uadum tot milia cumba
nec pueri credunt, nisi qui nondum aere lauantur.

Here, frogs contribute to the debunking of the Underworld of mythology and elevated poetry, because of the incongruity between lowly frogs and the mythological setting. Similarly, in *Satire* 3 the appearance of the frogs is satirically powerful because of its incongruity.

Other small and humble creatures are used in a similar way by Juvenal later in *Satire* 3 to convey Umbricius' bitterness and to create comic incongruity. Firstly at 207, the 'climax' to the list of the poor man's possessions is: *diuina opici rodebant carmina mures*. Here the perfectly balanced 'Golden Line' is at odds with what is described so elegantly: the wonders of poetry are not at all appreciated by the philistine mice. Then at 230–1, Umbricius ends his idealised description of country life by saying: *est aliquid, quocumque loco, quocumque recessu, / unius sese dominum fecisse lacertae*. The last word delivers a surprise: in its place we might expect a word such as *capella* (as Courtney observes), which would suit Umbricius' description of a modest life-style in the country. The effect of Juvenal's substitution of *lacertae* is to

Cf. Propertius 2.27.1–2 'uos incertam, mortales, funeris horam / quaeritis et qua sit mors aditura uia'. A father's death might naturally hold particular interest for his son(s) who stood to inherit from him.

¹¹ For Roman suspicion of astrologers and diviners in general, see R. MacMullen, *op. cit.*, ch. 4; A. A. Barb, 'The Survival of Magic Arts', in A. Momigliano (ed.), *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963), 100–25, p. 105. Consultations about the death of relatives were illegal: see MacMullen (above), pp. 129–30.

¹² Part of the reason for choosing frogs rather than any other lowly animal may very well be their role in another form of prediction, namely weather-prophets (see note 8 above), allowing the *para prosdokian*.

¹³ Cf. also the mock-Homeric tale of the battle of the frogs and mice, the *Batrachomyomachia*; Cicero's amusing reference to the clients of Ulubrae put into his charge at *Fam.* 7.18.3: *uim maximam ranuncolorum*; the fable of the frog which puffs itself up until it bursts, used in *Hor. Sat.* 2.3.314–20 (also *Phaedrus* 1.24, *Babrius* 28; cf. *Petr. Satyr.* 74.13 *inflat se tamquam rana*); and *Trimalchio's* picture of his success in life: *sic amicus uester, qui fuit rana, nunc est rex (Satyr.* 77.6), which may be a proverb.

hint at the utter corruption of Rome, by suggesting that for Umbricius such a minute plot of land¹⁴ is preferable to the dangerous, expensive, iniquitous and un-Roman Rome.¹⁵

To return to Umbricius' attitude to divination. Professor Nisbet has tentatively re-opened the possibility that the man should be identified or otherwise associated with the 'imperial *haruspex* (*L'Année Épigraphique*, 1930, no. 52 'haruspici Caesarum'), the most expert of Pliny's time (*Nat.* 10.19), whose dire prophecies to Galba are described by Tac. *Hist.* 1.27.1.¹⁶ This is a most attractive suggestion. In either case, Umbricius in Satire 3 presents himself as a useless, out-of-work *haruspex* who declares that he is not prepared to stoop so low as to predict the date of a father's demise or to examine the entrails of improper victims; instead he prefers to leave the city of sin and crime for a quiet life in the Bay of Naples.

Whether Juvenal's Umbricius is identified with the imperial *haruspex* or simply taken to evoke such a *haruspex*, it must be observed that Cumae (lines 2–3 *sedem figere Cumis / destinet*) is a highly appropriate destination: he is going to join the lonely (hence *uacuis...Cumis*¹⁷) home of his fellow-prophet, the Sibyl (and departing, appropriately enough, from the over-crowded grove of another fellow-prophet, Egeria). It perhaps gives a particular point to the speaker's words at the opening of the poem, *unum ciuem donare Sibyllae* (3): 'to donate one citizen to the Sibyl'.¹⁸ Here *ciuem* could be interpreted as 'Roman citizen' (*TLL ciuis* 1223.38ff.), especially as Umbricius presents himself as the quintessential Roman (born in Rome, on the Aventine,¹⁹ lines 84–5) fleeing from an un-Roman Rome (lines 60–1 and *passim*). But, Professor Nisbet suggests, *ciuem* could equally well mean 'fellow-citizen'.²⁰ On this interpretation, Umbricius is viewed as a compatriot of the Sibyl thanks to his status as a professional prophet. Moreover, the gloomy nature of the predictions of the *haruspex* Umbricius to Galba at Tac. *Hist.* 1.27.1 accords well enough with the grim

¹⁴ For a similar description of a tiny plot of land see Martial 11.18, e.g. line 12 *urucam male pascit hortus unam*. There may also be here a literary reminiscence of Ovid, *Met.* 5.457–8: cf. L. J. D. Richardson 'The Size of the Lizard', *Hermathena* 57 (1941), 128–9.

¹⁵ Another possible motive for Umbricius' departure from Rome is because he is a jaundiced failure and not for any high moral principles. This is an issue I have explored in 'City and Country in Roman Satire', in *Satire and Society in Ancient Rome*, ed. S. H. Braund (1989), 28–34. In this case, with the *para prosdokian* of *lacertae* Juvenal is suggesting that if you leave the perils of Rome 'to make yourself the master of one lizard', then perhaps it is not worth leaving the metropolis at all.

¹⁶ *BICS* Suppl. 51 (1988), p. 92 n. 9. The identification of Juvenal's Umbricius with the *haruspex* was rejected outright with no reason given by Mayor (J. E. B. Mayor, *Thirteen Satires of Juvenal*⁴ (London, 1886–9) on 3.21–57) and Ferguson (J. Ferguson, *Juvenal: The Satires* (New York, 1979) on 3.1); Highet (G. Highet, *Juvenal The Satirist* (Oxford, 1954), p. 253 n. 7) also rejects the identification as incompatible with lines 42–5.

¹⁷ Cf. Courtney's note on *unum* 3.3 (E. Courtney, *A Commentary on the Satires of Juvenal* (London, 1980)).

¹⁸ For the notion of 'giving a citizen' cf. Tac. *Ann.* 4.43 *eum legibus pulsum ciuem sibi Zmyrnaei addiderant*, often in the sense of 'adding to the civic roll', as Cic. *Arch.* 4, Plin. *Ep.* 10.114.1, Suet. *Aug.* 42.2. For *donare* used of people cf. Sen. *Apocol.* 15.2 *Caesar illum Aeaco donat*, Petr. *Satyr.* 127.3 *dono tibi fratrem meum*, Ov. *Met.* 1.622 *paelice donata*.

¹⁹ Umbricius' birth on the Aventine may suggest his bad luck, for the place was thought to lie under a curse, cf. Gell. 13.14.6 *quasi auibus obsценis ominosum*, because of its associations with Remus: see R. Syme, *Roman Papers* 1, ed. E. Badian (1979), p. 314 = *Hermes* 84 (1956), p. 266; moreover, the fact that the Aventine for a very long time in Roman history lay outside the *pomerium* of Rome (i.e. outside the limit of the city auspices: see Gell. 13.14.1–4) may symbolise Umbricius' alienation and eventual withdrawal from Rome.

²⁰ For *ciuis* meaning 'fellow-citizen', cf. Manil. 4.634 *Crete ciuem sortita Tonantem*, Plaut. *Rud.* 1–2 *qui gentis omnis mariaque et terras mouet / eius sum ciuis ciuitate caelitem*; *municeps* too bears this meaning, at Juv. 4.33, 14.271, Mart. 10.87.10, 14.114.2.

picture of life in Rome presented by Umbricius in Juvenal Satire 3. Indeed, it may be that Juvenal's character is inspired by Tacitus, for Juvenal draws his people from recent and contemporary literature²¹ – and Tacitus' *Histories* had only recently been published.²² Thus prosopography together with perception of the incongruous and an appreciation of the literary backdrop to Juvenal's Satires here combine to illuminate the mysterious figure of Umbricius.

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²¹ On the 'literary substrata' to Juvenal's Satires see G. B. Townend, *JRS* 63 (1973), 148–60.

²² Syme argues powerfully, with particular reference to another passage from Juvenal's first Book of Satires, that Tacitus' *Histories* had recently been published: *Roman Papers* III, ed. A. R. Birley (1984), pp. 1144–6 = *AJPh* 100 (1979), 261–3.