

## THE DEATH OF CINNA THE POET

In an essay entitled 'Cinna the Poet' published in 1974,<sup>1</sup> T. P. Wiseman forcefully countered the arguments of Monroe E. Deutsch and others<sup>2</sup> against the identification of the 'neoteric' poet Cinna<sup>3</sup> with the tribune Gaius Helvius Cinna, who after Caesar's funeral was torn to pieces by an enraged mob, mistaken by it for the praetor Lucius Cornelius Cinna, who had applauded Caesar's murder. The identification of the poet with the tribune is supported by Plutarch, *Brutus* 20.4, where the murdered tribune is called a ποιητικὸς ἀνὴρ. As Wiseman says, 'there are six other ancient accounts of the murder,<sup>4</sup> drawn from a source or sources unknown; five of them call the victim a tribune of the *plebs*, and none of them says he was a poet. Impressed by this, many scholars have thought that the victim was not in fact the poet Helvius Cinna, and M. E. Deutsch suggested in 1925 that either (i) the phrase in the *Brutus* describing him as a poet is a gloss, or (ii) "the tribune also dabbled in verse but was not the famous poet"'.<sup>5</sup> Wiseman's refutation of the various arguments of Deutsch and his followers against the identity of the poet and the tribune seems to me quite cogent, but the debate shows no sign of having been brought to a close: G. V. Sumner concludes his review<sup>6</sup> of Wiseman's essay with an argument that the tribune was probably somewhat younger than the poet, and the suggestion that the tribune may have been 'the *adoptive*, and hence homonymous, son of the poet'.

This debate, which has consumed so many pages in scholarly journals and books, ought to have been terminated a century ago, for there is yet another ancient reference, earlier than all the rest, to the murder of the poet and tribune, which although allusive is more specific than Plutarch's offhand remark that the tribune was a ποιητικὸς ἀνὴρ. After referring to several other people who were killed by being mangled or torn to pieces, at *Ibis* 539–40 Ovid says

conditor ut tardae, laesus cognomine, Myrrhae,  
Urbis in innumeris inueniari locis.

This couplet was elucidated in 1883 by the 24-year old A. E. Housman,<sup>6</sup> just after he had begun his clerkship at the Patent Office. Myrrha is, of course, a variant form of Smyrna, the incestuous daughter of Cinyras whom Cinna made the subject of his epyllion. The epithet 'tardae', 'long-delayed', refers to the nine years which Cinna spent writing this poem, as Catullus tells us at 95.1–2:

Smyrna mei Cinnae nonam post denique messem  
quam coepta est nonamque edita post hiemem.

The phrase 'laesus cognomine', 'harmed because of his *cognomen*', is an admirably

<sup>1</sup> T. P. Wiseman, *Cinna the Poet and Other Roman Essays* (Leicester, 1974), pp. 44–6.

<sup>2</sup> M. E. Deutsch, *CJ* 20 (1925), 326–36; C. Lindskog and K. Ziegler [edd.], *Plutarchi Vitae Parallelae* (Leipzig, 1932), ii. 220; K. Ziegler, *RhM* 87 (1932), 81–7; J. W. Spaeth, Jr., *CJ* 32 (1937), 548–9; W. A. Cook, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14 (1963), 97; K. Vretska, in *Der Kleine Pauly* ii (Stuttgart, 1967), col. 1019, E. Castorina, *Questioni Neoteriche* (Florence, 1968), pp. 72–3.

<sup>3</sup> For the scanty remains of his poetry, see W. Morel's or K. Büchner's editions of the *Fragmenta Poetarum Latinorum*.

<sup>4</sup> Plutarch, *Caesar* 68.2; Valerius Maximus 9.9.1; Suetonius, *Div. Jul.* 85; Appian, *Bell. Civ.* 2.147; Cassius Dio 44.50.4; Zonaras 10.12.

<sup>5</sup> G. V. Sumner, *Phoenix* 29 (1975), 393–5.

<sup>6</sup> A. E. Housman, *JPh* 12 (1883), 167. Previous editors, such as Burman, Merkel, Riese, and Robinson Ellis, had printed P. Leopardus' conjecture 'conditor ut tardae, *Blaesus* cognomine, *Cyrae*, | orbis in innumeris inueniari locis', which was taken as a reference to the wanderings of Aristoteles, later known as Battus, before his foundation of Cyrene.

succinct reference to the fatal confusion of the tribune C. Helvius Cinna with the praetor L. Cornelius Cinna. The pentameter 'Urbis in innumeris inueniari locis'<sup>7</sup> is a most apt description of the tearing apart of Cinna's body and the scattering of its many pieces about 'the City', Rome.

I may add that one could not reasonably hope to find a better witness than Ovid to the identity of the poet and the tribune. As a young man in Rome in the 20s B.C., Ovid would have had ample opportunity to converse with Romans of the previous generation who had themselves been in the city on the day of Caesar's funeral and Cinna's murder. And as the author of the extended account of Myrrha and Cinyras in the middle of *Met.* 10, Ovid must have been familiar with the famous poem of his renowned predecessor: indeed, it seems likely that at *Met.* 10.469–70 and 10.503 Ovid is directly indebted to the wording of a verse of Cinna's *Smyrna* (fr. 7 Morel).<sup>8</sup> Hence it would be surprising if Ovid were *not* well aware of the circumstances of the death of Cinna the poet.

When Housman first elucidated this couplet in 1883, he was, like many others, under the impression that Vergil, *Ecl.* 9.35–6 indicated that Cinna the poet was still alive after 44 B.C., and so he concluded by saying 'whether Ovid dreamt that the tribune and the poet were one, or whether he was humouring a popular fancy, or whether these lines are not Ovid's, let others say'. In 1920, when he had occasion to write on this couplet again,<sup>9</sup> he observed that Adolf Kiessling had shown in 1877 that the reasons against identifying the two had little weight,<sup>10</sup> and that recent literary handbooks were inclined to accept the identification. Housman's evidently correct interpretation of this couplet was quite explicitly adopted by S. G. Owen in his 1915 OCT of the *Tristia*, the *Ex Ponto*, and Ovid's minor poems, by J. H. Mozley in his 1929 Loeb edition of the *Ars Am.*, the *Rem. Am.*, and the minor poems, by F. W. Lenz in his 1937 Paravia edition of the *Ibis*, by A. La Penna in his 1957 La Nuova Italia edition of the *Ibis*, and by J. André in his 1963 Budé edition of the *Ibis*.

Normally there would seem to be little point in recounting an interpretation of a couplet in a major author published by a prominent scholar not just once but twice in a readily accessible journal (and yet a third time in that scholar's collected papers)<sup>11</sup> and often repeated in standard editions of the author, but given that none of the many literary historians who have subsequently written on the poet and the tribune seems to have been aware of the decisive evidence which settles the matter once for all, in this case it seems necessary to do so, in the hope that they will at last take notice of Ovid's couplet and Housman's interpretation of it. I may add that this incident in the annals of *Altertumswissenschaftsliteraturgeschichte* shows that modern writers on ancient literature who dismissively regard Housman as merely a *Wortphilolog* do so at their peril.

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<sup>7</sup> *Urbis*, rather than the predominantly transmitted *orbis*, was conjectured by Housman in the apparatus to his edition of the *Ibis* in J. P. Postgate's *Corpus Poetarum Latinorum* i.2 (London, 1894), p. 594; later he realised that it was in fact the reading of a pair of minor MSS. [*JPh* 35 (1920), 315–16]. The parallels for it which Housman adduced are quite cogent, and it has been generally adopted by editors, e.g. by Owen in his 1915 OCT, by Lenz in his 1937 Paravia edition, by La Penna in his 1957 La Nuova Italia edition, and by Goold in his 1979 revision of the Loeb edition.

<sup>8</sup> As suggested by H. Dahlmann, *Über Helvius Cinna* (AAWM [1977], No. 8), pp. 44–5.

<sup>9</sup> *JPh* 35 (1920), 315–16.

<sup>10</sup> A. Kiessling, in *Commentationes Philologiae in Honorem Theodori Mommseni* (Berlin, 1877), 351–5. The date '1887' in Housman's article is incorrect.

<sup>11</sup> J. Diggle and F. R. D. Goodyear [edd.], *The Classical Papers of A. E. Housman* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 9 and 1040.