

Fulgentius on the Death of Alexander (*De aet.* p. 167.9ff.)

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Fulgentius's *De aetatibus mundi et hominis* is by any standard a neglected work. The only modern edition dates to 1898; no commentary exists, and to date there has been no reliable translation of the whole work into any language¹. Only Book X, which is devoted to Alexander the Great, has received anything like a satisfactory treatment². Yet even here problems of text and interpretation remain to be solved. One of these involves the close of the chapter, in which Fulgentius meditates upon Alexander's extraordinary accomplishments and inglorious end:

Sed quid profuit omnia invicta vincere et servili veneno succumbere. Huius actus huiusque mortem qui semper mente considerat, moriturum se esse non credit; numquam enim mortis malo terretur qui alieno malo considerato corrigitur.

Whitbread renders the final sentence as follows:

Whoever ponders in mind his deeds and his death, can scarcely believe that he himself must die; for one who is set straight by considering other evils, can never be frightened by the evil of death.

One might note in passing the mistranslation of *alieno malo* (not "other evils" but "other *people's* evils"). A more serious problem, however, is presented by *credit*. Why should consideration of Alexander's death inspire Fulgentius's readers with (false) intimations of their own immortality? It is one thing not to *fear* death, but why should that lead one to conclude that one is not subject to it?

Stöcker recognized the difficulty, and his translation reflects his proposed correction of *credit* to *tremat* or *metuat*:

Wer ständig die Taten und den Tod dieses Mannes in seinem Herzen bedenkt, dürfte sich nicht davor fürchten, einmal selbst zu sterben; denn niemals fürchtet sich vor dem Übel des Todes, wer durch die Betrachtung eines fremden (Todes-)Übels sich bessert.

1 R. Helm, ed. *Fabii Planciadis Fulgentii V.C. Opera* (Leipzig 1898, repr. Stuttgart 1970); on the rendering by L. G. Whitbread, *Fulgentius the Mythographer* (Columbus, Ohio 1971) cf. the review by R. T. Bruère, *CPh* 68 (1973) 143–145.

2 C. Stöcker, "Alexander der Grosse bei Fulgentius und die Historia Alexandri Macedonis des Antidamas", *Vig. Christ.* 33 (1979) 55–75; cf. G. Hays, "A Second Look at Fulgentius's Alexander", *Vig. Christ.* 54 (2000) 204–207.

On this reading, consideration of Alexander's end should prompt us to recognize the vanity of earthly ambitions. Thus corrected, we will devote ourselves to living a good (Christian) life; if we do so, we shall be saved, and thus need not fear death. This at least makes logical sense, although the sequence of thought remains somewhat elliptical. In particular, the crucial contrast between the pagan Alexander and the Christian salvation available to Fulgentius's audience has to be imported by the reader without any indication from the text.

In reality there is a simpler solution. What requires correction is not Helm's text, but his punctuation:

Sed quid profuit omnia invicta vincere et servili veneno succumbere? Huius actus huiusque mortem qui semper mente considerat, moriturum se esse non credat? Numquam enim mortis malo terretur qui alieno malo considerato corrigitur.

Once we recognize that *huius ... non credat* is a rhetorical question (and the subjunctive *credat* thus potential rather than hortatory), the sense falls into place: "Can anyone who meditates continually on this man's deeds and on his death doubt that he himself will die?"³ Fulgentius's meditation thus reveals itself as a variation on a familiar consolatory *topos* ("Even famous person X died; *a fortiori* you must also"), as found for example at Lucretius 3.1024ff.: *reges rerumque potentes | occiderunt ... tu vero dubitabis et indignabere obire?*⁴

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3 I think there can be little doubt that this is how Helm himself understood the sentence. Failure to mark rhetorical questions as such is one of the more irritating features of his edition (cf. *De aet.* XI *passim*).

4 For further examples see Nisbet and Hubbard on Horace *Odes* 1.28.7; R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Urbana 1962) 253f.; E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. Trask (Princeton 1953) 80.