

ANIMAL IMAGERY IN EXPRESSING NOBILITY: SALOMON FRENZEL'S *PROPEMPTICON*

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Abstract. In his *propempticon* poem *De Vera Nobilitate*, Salomon Frenzel, a humanist of the 16th century who spent his last years of activity in Riga, uses the imagery of various mythological and natural creatures (i.e., animals, mixanthropic beings etc.). These images are employed to express matters regarding education and the relationship between *nobilitas generis* and *nobilitas literarum* in general and in Livonia. The use of this specific imagery is twofold – monsters (e.g., the Cyclops, centaurs etc.) are used mainly for the description of uneducated nobles, but more idyllic and pastoral characters (e.g., the Pegasus) are used to describe the nobles who are friends with the Muses (i.e., educated in the Renaissance humanist fashion). This paper will delve into a close reading of Frenzel's *propempticon* and inspect particular examples from it, providing an analysis of them in the context of the poem.

Keywords: Salomon Frenzel, *propempticon*, Riga Humanism, Livonia, *nobilitas literaria*, *vera nobilitas*.

1. Introduction

The discussion on nobility was a popular topic during the Renaissance epoch – starting with Poggio Bracciolini's *De Nobilitate* in 1440 and having its final echoes in the works by the so-called Riga Humanists at the very end of the 16th century. Among other compositions by the Riga Humanists, one work deserves special attention in the context of the discourse on nobility – Salomon Frenzel's *De vera nobilitate et literarum dignitate* (Riga, 1599; *On True Nobility and the Dignity of Arts and Sciences*), a *propempticon* devoted to his fellow Johann Gotthard Tiesenhausen, who was on the brink of departure to Germany for studies at a university. This short *propempticon* consisting only of a concise, introductory foreword and 255 dactylic hexameter verses offers enough material

for discussion in the framework of animal, mythical being and bestial imageries. This set of imageries has to be analyzed in close connection with the main topic of the poem – the distinction between *nobilitas generis* and *nobilitas literaria* and the important role of education in order to step from nobility by birth to nobility by virtue. In this paper, we will offer a close reading of Frenzel's text from the aspect of the aforementioned topics and imagery as well as their use and possible meaning in the poem.

2. Salomon Frenzel's *Propempticon*

Salomon Frenzel's text – his *propempticon* on the subject of true nobility, titled *De vera nobilitate* – has two editions: one from 1593 (Olmütz) and one from 1599 (Riga). Each edition is devoted to a diffe-

rent person – to Johannes Cocors von Camenitz and Johann Gotthard Tiesenhausen, respectively. The second edition is called *De vera nobilitate et literarum dignitate*, but the first edition has the generic title *Propempticon* with a further elaboration of the title – *in quo de vera nobilitate et literarum dignitate paucis agitur* (“wherein briefly it is dealt with true nobility and the dignity of arts and sciences”), so the theme of nobility and education, if we judge from the title, might seem of secondary importance in the first edition of the *propempticon*. Though after a closer analysis of the text, it is evident that these topics are of primary importance to it. The text editions do not differ considerably in their content, but some discrepancies can be observed both in the foreword and among some passages, and in some cases, these differences have major consequences regarding the image system of the *propempticon*, as we will try to show in this article.

If we take a look back at the first treatises on *nobilitas literaria* in the Renaissance (Bracciolini 1440), we can see that this topic is of major importance to the humanists for two reasons – one is to give arguments for being capable of participation in the power relationships in early modernity, and the second is the interest for the discourse of vices and virtues in Antiquity and the adaptation of Plato’s and Aristotle’s ethical ideas for the new sociopolitical conditions in the West (Rabil 1991, 1–23). Although Bracciolini does not deny the importance of *nobilitas generis* and inherited wealth and power, he tries to accentuate the importance of *nobilitas literaria* and its superior position over the nobility that is defined by class rather than by virtue and education.

Partly, Frenzel’s motivation in choosing such a theme is compatible with Charles Trinkaus’ opinion that Renaissance humanists, in their texts on true nobility, are seeking solutions to the problems of their individual lives – how to put themselves as equals with the existing local elites (Trinkaus 1940, 56). But contrary to the early humanist texts that deal mostly with the discussion of ethics and virtue as the foundation of true nobility, Frenzel’s text is also a social document that illustrates the milieu of Livonian nobility and the attitude among them toward education in sciences and arts.

Frenzel reproduces this idea of the superiority of *nobilitas literaria* in his text, admitting that the *nobilitas generis* is a great starting point for the pursuit of *vera nobilitas* – the one granted by the Muses, and it is a shame that so few of the nobles by birth not only do not attain the summits of *nobilitas literaria* but are not eager to pursue it altogether. So before we start to analyze the animal imagery in Frenzel’s text, it must be mentioned that we can find one key notion in his text, and that is the *discrimen* (Spekke 1925, v.105) or the difference that a humanist education can make. Frenzel vividly indicates two intellectual species of human beings – for each of them he uses different epithets, similes and metaphors and a noble imagery is reserved not for the nobles by birth but for the nobles by rebirth (or education).

Frenzel’s attitude toward *nobilitas generis* is similar to the poetic descriptions of the Livonian land by Plinius in his *Encomium Rigae* (Riga, 1595) – Livonia offers a great starting point for the nobles to flourish not only physically but spiritually and mentally as well, if only they further their

education in the highest of institutions. Intellectual nobility is necessary in order to gain from the the fertile land and its natural resources (cf. the scene of beeswax in *Encomium Rigae* (Spekke 1927, 47–48)) – a sentiment that Frenzel expresses in his exhortations to return to Livonian fields after education abroad in order to fully appreciate the local advantages (Spekke 1925, 216–255).

3. *Animalia Frenzelii*

As in most cases, animal imagery is a very fruitful method for expressing human affairs from various aspects. Animals are used as mirrors that express character traits, social relationships etc., reaching back to the Homeric epics, where heroes are being equated to lions, wolves etc (Tumans 2009, 42). Although Frenzel was a newcomer to Riga, he understood the local context quite well – education and its acquisition on the highest level was not a trend in Riga. Although the ideas of the Reformation were adopted in Riga very early, the educational aspect was overlooked, and Riga maintained a pragmatical and mercantile outlook. Influenced by the activities of the Riga Humanists, the Riga Dome School did undergo some reforms, but it did not experience a transformation into a university (Lāms 2015, 17). The circumstances of education in Livonia can be described as *res angustae* (Spekke 1925, 165–166; “in miserable condition”) to use an expression from Frenzel’s text. In turn, his *propempticon* serves as a handbook of advice on how to overcome this condition and transform one’s circumstances to *res augustae* (“a noble condition”) with the help of proper education. Frenzel’s *propempticon*, as a genre of poetry, itself

shows that if one is willing to gain serious knowledge and education, one must leave Riga or Livonia and go study abroad.

Frenzel’s text is not of epic proportions as it consists only of 255 lines in dactylic hexameter and a short foreword. Throughout Frenzel’s text, the main metaphor for *nobilitas literaria* is the building of a palace, but animal and mythological imagery are used as situational metaphors, epithets and similar poetical devices. The *bestiarium* of Frenzel’s poem is not vast but convincing and elaborate nonetheless. Animals are used to describe the uneducated man as he is believed to be of no worth for civilized society. In contrast, one who is willingly engaging with the practice of arts and sciences (*amor doctrinarum*, Spekke 1925, v. 15–16; “love of learning”) is always in the company of the Muses and the Charites, as well as the gods Athena and Apollo, but Frenzel does not compare such a person with these deities – one is only cherished by them. By this approach – by mainly employing the imagery of beings from different realms for different types of people – Frenzel sketches that a human being, while in one’s natural state, is closer to animals and bestial beings, but an educated and cultural one becomes god-like and possessing of divine qualities.

The bipartite divisions of nobility – *nobilitas generis* and *nobilitas literaria* – in Frenzel’s text are treated not as separate nobilities but as levels or degrees of nobility. As can be observed from Frenzel’s text, he does not speak about *nobilitas literaria* that can be attained for a *homo novus* – the only true *nobilitas literaria* can be attained by those who have *nobilitas generis*, but not every nobleman by birth is willing to make his mind and spirit reach the summits of nobility. Thus, Frenzel’s

views expressed in his poem can be regarded as thoroughly elitist. The elitism is furthered by the favors of *Fortuna*, as not everyone will be able to reach *nobilitas literaria* even if they would be willing to. One must have natural abilities that are fit for the pursuit of nobility – *nam pectora tantum / nobilia his* – who love *artes bonae* and have *amor virtutis* (Spekke 1925, v. 67–83; “only the hearts of those are noble [who love] the good arts [and have] love of virtue”). Thus *natura excellens* or excellent natural ability to perceive *artes bonae* – are not dependent on one’s own will, only the process of building a noble character is.

One of the animals that is used extensively by Frenzel is a horse – *equus* is both a horse and a metonymy for the noble class. The horse is a popular image among the humanists in their treatises on the true nobility, as Bracciolini stated, too, that “[a] horse is not called strong, beautiful, and swift because his parents were, but because he is of harmonious build, has the strength to carry his rider, and is aroused by the sound of the trumpet. Thus I shall call noble the one who distinguishes himself through his own virtues, not the one who can point to illustrious parents” (Rabil 1991, 78–79).¹

Frenzel transfers this comparison with horses to the noble class, saying that there are *Equites bini* (Spekke 1925, v. 100; “two types of Equites”) – and their level of nobility is revealed during a symposium (*convivium*) or *praelia Bacchica* (Spek-

ke 1925, v. 60–61; “Bacchic battles”), as he also calls it. A cultured man knows how to drink properly and not become a wild animal – unlike the uneducated, who drink themselves to an animal state. In the text edition of 1593, he uses the expression *liquor pegaseus* (Frenzelius 1593; “Pegasean liquid”), which is the drink for the intellectually ennobled; the others have not even had a sip from this source. This epithet is changed to *liquor castalius* (“Castalian liquid”) in the edition of 1599, thus retaining the connection with the arts and the Muses but without the support of animal imagery. So, an uneducated man is an animal among humans and not a being who shares divine qualities.

In a way, these dissimilarities between editions can be regarded as minor and insignificant, as proposed by Viiding (2014, 221). But in the context of nobility and animal imagery, the change from *liquor pegaseus* to *liquor castalius* is of crucial importance for the balance of the images used to describe the *litterati*. As Frenzel names the nobles in his poems *equites* and the educated ones as those who have taken a sip from the Pegasean springs, and as Pegasus is the winged horse of poetry, this change of image to the Castalian spring destroys the set of images devised by Frenzel, as there is no symmetrical counterpart to the centaurs in the 1599 edition of the poem, and the direct connection to *equites* between the employed imagery is lost as well; thus, the balance of imagery is shattered. One can only wonder about the reasons Frenzel had for this change of images.

For the nobles that hold further education in contempt, he uses the imagery of mythological creatures that are semi-animals – centaurs in this case, which are

¹ *Sicut enim equum fortem pulchrum atque acrem dicimus, non cui eiusmodi genitor fuit, sed quem membrorum convenientia spectandum fecit, cui vires adsint ad ferendum sessorem quem buccinae cantus excitat, ita non eum qui parentes preclaros enumerat, sed qui suis virtutibus resplendet nobilem appellabo* (Bracciolini 1513, 29).

half-human, half-horse: *O Centaurorum genus!* (Spekke 1925, 67; “Oh, race of Centaurs!”). Frenzel uses centaurs in a negative sense, although they are ambivalent – Chiron would be quite the opposite of the image of the centaurs that Frenzel depicts, as he does not *contemnit artes* (“contemn the arts”). Frenzel uses the image of a horse as a metonymical device to describe nobility; thus, the use of a centaur for semi-nobles (nobles by birth) is quite appropriate.

The animals are closely connected with deities that are of similar nature to them. In Frenzel’s text, the Centaurus is a representative of Aphrodite (Venus), Eros (Amor) and Ares (Mavors). Frenzel’s portrayal of these deities in this text is negative, although the image of Mars is ambivalent as well – he is mostly depicted as being wild and ferocious, and those nobles who are centaur-like are always ready to insult the nobles who are welcoming the humanist ideals – *in lingua Mavors sedet* (Spekke 1925, 70; “Mars sits on their tongues”). At the same time, Frenzel uses the expression *nec arte nec Marte valetis* (“[you don’t have] any worth both in the arts and in war”) when he is describing the *Centaurorum genus* – namely the nobles who are not interested in educating themselves, as opposed to the truly noble ones who can excel both in the arts and on the battlefield (Spekke 1925, 225–228).

Frenzel also uses the image of a horse when talking about the skills a noble man should have: *[p]osse [suo tempore] decenter equum regere [opus est]* (Spekke 1925, 225–228; “[it is necessary] to be able [at the right time] to ride a horse in a decent manner”). It is not a metaphor or a simile but a literal use of the animal horse, to indicate that a truly noble person will be

worthy of riding a horse and to carry the denomination of *eques*, which is a synonym of *noble* in this context. As Frenzel uses the image of a centaur for the nobles by birth, it is no wonder that they are described in this *propempticon* as half-man, half-horse, as only the educated nobles grow out of their state of half-horseness into a human being and are able, with the help of their skills, to ride a horse and thus structurally and hierarchically to put a horse beneath them and be superior to it.

In Frenzel’s text, there appear crocodiles as well, and this image is used as a simile for tyrants. As the savage crocodiles are afraid of civilized people who live in Tentyra, so the tyrants are afraid of educated men – *verentur / doctorum monumenta hominum* (Spekke 1925, 177–178; “[they] are afraid of the works by educated men”). Thus, again, uneducated beings are compared to the kingdom of animals – the ferocious ones – but educated beings are described as closely related to the Muses. Frenzel views nature as conquerable by men, because human beings give shape to the scenery and can use natural resources to their own benefit; doing this also ennobles nature itself, expelling wild animals from the scenery and giving attention only to tame or tamable animals, as they may become virtuous if they serve a purpose beneficial to their master, namely an educated human – *tu custos diviti horti es / hunc cole* (Spekke 1925, v. 187–188; “you are a guardian of a divine garden – take care of it!”). *Hortus* is to be understood both literally and metaphorically in this *propempticon*.

Another image Frenzel uses is that of the Cyclops. Although the Cyclops is not an animal, we can conceive it as a simile of a disfigured human being who comes

from the uncultured and uncivilized wilderness. Frenzel states that the educated nobility will be able to crush every *ignominia Cyclopum* (Spekke 1925, 120–121; “Cyclopean ignorance”) – so in a way, Frenzel alludes to the *Odyssey* and that only education can grant an exit from the Cyclop’s cave. In the case of the *propempticon* to Tiesenhausen, the educational journey from Livonia to Germany can be paralleled to the journey by Odysseus, and a successful return to Livonia would be a successful completion of one’s own odyssey. Otherwise, one will remain only in the reigns of intellectual darkness. Also, the one-eyedness of a Cyclops is a symbol for uneducated nobles – although they have two eyes physically, mentally they must open the other one by educating themselves.

The conclusion of his poem is expressed in idyllic and pastoral notes. The rural peace of the Livonian scenery is what Tiesenhausen must aim for when he returns from university: [*r*]us cole: tecum operas capient, tecumque quietem (Spekke 1925, 170; “take care of your country estate: it will share the toil with you and it will share peace as well”) – the Muses will be waiting for him. By no accident does Frenzel use the image of Galatea that might be awaiting Tiesenhausen upon his return to Livonia. In the idyllic garden portrayed by Frenzel, there is no place for such uneducated and wild beasts as the Cyclops or the half-noble centaurs, as Galatea is one of the nymphs picking flowers in the Livonian meadows.

As already mentioned, the main image (allegorical in nature) of his *propempticon* that vines throughout the poem, one of a building that with the attainment of

nobilitas literaria turns into a palace as the final goal of exercising the liberal arts and sciences, is *praelustre palatium condere* (Spekke 1925, v. 183–184; “to build a magnificent palace”). When a nobleman reaches the second degree of nobility, he ennobles his milieu as well, not only his mind and soul. Therefore, the nobilization of oneself is in its result not an individual endeavor.

4. Conclusion

To conclude – Frenzel, throughout his *propempticon*, shows that educating oneself is hard work, and that not everyone is willing to engage in this labor but would rather comfortably choose to stay in the semi-human state despite being born in the noble class. In Frenzel’s case, it seems that *la noblesse n’oblige pas*, but it is an obligation one can impose unto himself if one wants to excel in virtue, learn and thus attain dignity and true nobility. To illustrate his point, Frenzel uses animal and mythological imagery to delineate the properties of the educated and uneducated – the traits of the Cyclops, the Centaurs and crocodiles are attributed to the ones who are only noble by birth, in return connecting the images of the Pegasus, the Muses and the horse to the ones who endeavor to further ennoble themselves by education. Frenzel, along with other humanists in Riga, were sure that education and the practice of liberal arts can ennoble a person and dignify his status, as it is not the palace but virtue that sets anyone apart as truly noble. As he concludes in his *propempticon*, *non villa, sed illa nobilitat / VIRTUS* (“what ennobles is not the villa, but it – the virtue”).

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SALOMONO FRENZELIO PROPEPTIKONAS: GYVŪNŲ ĮVAIZDŽIAI KAIP KILMINGUMO IŠRAIŠKA

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S a n t r a u k a

Salomonas Frenzelis, XVI a. humanistas, paskutinius savo gyvenimo metus praleidęs Rygoje, propemptikone *De vera nobilitate* vartoja įvairių mitologinių ir realių gyvūnų įvaizdžius. Šie įvaizdžiai pasitelkiami kalbant apie aukštuomenės išsilavinimą ir santykį tarp *nobilitas generis* ir *nobilitas literarum*, egzistavusį Livonijoje ir apskritai to meto pasaulyje. Kūrinyje pateikiami įvaizdžiai yra dviejų rūšių:

pabaisomis (pvz., kiklopais, kentaurais ir t. t.) dažniausiai vaizduojami neišsilavinę didikai, o idiliški ir pastoraliniai įvaizdžiai (pvz., Pegasas) apibūdina didikus, draugaujančius su mūzomis (t. y. gavusius Renesanso humanistinį išsilavinimą). Straipsnyje pateikiama pavyzdžių iš S. Frenzelio *Propemptikono*, pavyzdžiai analizuojami atsižvelgiant į visos poemos kontekstą.

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