

The Pythagorean Background To "Pythagoras Opinion" In Shakespeare

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All the allusions to Pythagoras by name in the works of Shakespeare - and we should find three of them - invariably associate the philosopher with his doctrine of transmigration. In two of these, i.e. *The Merchant of Venice*¹ and *Twelfth Night*,² this is unambiguously 'the opinion of Pythagoras', while in *As You Like It*³ an instance of previous existence is said to have taken place "in Pythagoras' time". All of which go to show that, if transmigration was not the only teaching which Shakespeare thought his audience was familiar with as of Pythagoras, it was certainly what they considered to be the most striking and idiosyncratic of the lot.

How much Pythagoreanism the dramatist himself knew is hard to guess *e silentio*. I am sure it was fairly considerable. But some material, such as the well-known passage on the Ages of Man in *As You Like It*⁴, some mythological allusions and certain phrases have suggested to some commentators on Shakespeare that his source - or at least his principal source - for Pythagoreanism must have been the Latin poet Ovid.⁵ On the strength of this it has been conjectured - and somewhat loosely at that - that Shakespeare's (exclusive) source for the Pythagorean doctrine of transmigration in each of the specific allusions to it cited above must have been, ultimately if not directly, the same.⁶

1. iv. 1. 136-146

2. iv. 2. 52-62

3. iii. 2. 172-175

4. ii. 7. 139-166

5. For the Ages of Man cp. Ovid *Metamorphoses* xv. 199-236. Touchstone's complaint that Audrey in *As You Like It* does not understand his poetry recalls Ovid's complaint that the Getae did not understand his (*Tristia* iii. 14. 39-40; v. 12. 33-54). Several commentators thought Shakespeare derived his notion of the Golden Age as a perpetual spring from Ovid (*Met.* 1. 107 f), and the related notion of the 'penalty of Adam' as being the seasons from Golding's 'Epistle Dedicatorie' to his 1567 translation of Ovid *Met.* Porter and Clarke (ed. 1906) and Rick (ed. 1919) p. 44) think the 'old custom' (ii. 1. 2) refers to the Golden Age in Ovid, and that Duke Senior's words of pity for the death of the deer (ii. 1. 21 f) may have been suggested by *Met.* xv 99-110. Porter and Clarke think the Duke's philosophy of the simple life may have been suggested by the account in Pythagoras speech of *Met.* xv, and Rick (p. 43) think Rosalind's specific reference to Pythagoras (iii. 2. 172-175) and the Duke's joking reference to the transformation of Jaques into a beast (ii. 7. 1-2) play on the idea of Pythagorean metempsychosis in Ovid.

6. See Thomas Baldwin *William Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke Urbana* (1944) p. 410. He suspects Shakespeare used Ovid directly in all his references to Pythagorean transmigration. But see H. H. Furness ed. *Twelfth Night or What You Will* [A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare] Philadelphia and London (1901) p. 263. He thinks these doctrines were familiar enough.

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I do not think this is so. If the dramatist did not make a broader use of his acquaintance with Pythagoreanism (and he could very well have acquired that acquaintance, if we disabuse our minds of the notion of his "Small Latine and Lesse Greeke") he had either no occasion to bring such material into his writings, or perhaps thoughtfully kept it out of them from a doubt whether his audience was up to the same degree of knowledge of his allusions as he. For, the evidence of the brief reference to the doctrine of transmigration itself that we have suggests a somewhat wider familiarity with this opinion of Pythagoras' than is conceded by the substance and treatment of it in the *Metamorphoses*. At the same time, it may have been these very sources which cautioned him against indiscriminate reliance on a whole lot of spurious material that Ovid foists on Pythagoras from other Greek and Roman writers and philosophers, together with some fast and loose imaginings of his own. Perhaps the division of life into four ages corresponding to the seasons belongs with these.⁷

The attractive element in the doctrine of transmigration in the contexts in which Shakespeare uses it must surely have been the curiosity of it to an audience fostered in the Christian notion of special creation, which encompasses the beliefs that human beings alone possessed souls, and flowing therefrom, that they were superior in creation to animals, together with the tenet of a single life upon this earth followed by eternal bliss or eternal damnation. Transmigration, or metempsychosis, involving as it does a plurality of lives and the ability of the soul to occupy human or animal bodies, flies in the face of all this – a heresy which the Christian Malvolio knew but thought too nobly of the soul to accept.⁸ But for all that, it afforded a challenging explanation of certain human experiences and traits which certainly did serve, even for a moment, to shake the faith of the Christian Gratiano.⁹ By the same token, however, the doctrine seems to have lent itself to the possibility of ridicule and parody at the hands of detractors, which, as we shall see, goes back in tradition to the time of its propagation in Greece by Pythagoras himself.

This ambivalent attitude to the belief in transmigration, picked up in the allusions to the doctrine in Shakespeare, has hardly any traces in Ovid; he merely gives a bland enunciation of it. If he works anything at all into it beyond this, it is the revulsion

7. This is attributed to Pythagoras by Diodorus (x.9.5.), who appears to have been Ovid's source for Pythagoreanism. [The idea of Pythagoras being Numa's instructor is also found in him.] Diogenes Laertius (viii 10) gives each of these a span of 20 years. The conception is rather banal, and may really have grown out of Pythagoras' comparison of life to the Olympic games, which categorizes men themselves into seekers of honour, seekers of gain and seekers of knowledge (in a dialogue with Leoa of Phlius; Cic. *Tusc. Disp.* v. 3; Heraclid. Pont. fr. 88 Wehrli). Cicero gives this tied up with transmigration; it certainly accords with the tripartition of the soul popular with Plato (sec *Rep.* 581c).

8. *Twelfth Night* iv. 2. 157-158

9. *Merchant of Venice* iv. 1. 130-133

from flesh eating (and not even killing altogether),¹⁰ which he raises to a frenetic cry more reminiscent of Empedocles than Pythagoras,¹¹ and enlists arguments in support of the avoidance of flesh which are palpably late and not to be traced in any worthwhile evidence of Pythagoras and early Pythagoreanism.¹²

1. Though none of the three references to Pythagorean transmigration gives any considerable account of the belief, that of *The Merchant of Venice*¹³ has implications that cannot but be interesting. The passage itself occurs at the point of the play at which Gratiano, observing that Shylock, adamant in having his pound of flesh, whets his knife on the sole of his shoe "to cut the forfeiture from that bankrout there,"¹⁴ exclaims:¹⁵

Not on thy sole, but on thy soul, harsh Jew,
Thou mak'st thy knife keen; . . .

And when he finds that no prayers can pierce him, it may be this very animadversion to Shylock's soul through the pun which sets Gratiano to expatiate on its nature - which he does in accordance with the belief associated famously with the name of Pythagoras. For, in anger and frustration he cries:¹⁶

O, be thou damn'd, execrable dog !
And for thy life let justice be accused.
Thou almost mak'st me waver in my faith,
To hold opinion with Pythagoras,
That souls of animals infuse themselves
Into the trunks of men : thy currish spirit
Govern'd a wolf, who, hang'd for human slaughter,
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And, whilst thou lay'st in thy unhallowed dam,
Infus'd itself in thee; for thy desires
Are wolfish, bloody, starv'd and ravenous.

10. xv. 174-175: 459-479. But see 477: *perdite sique nascent, verum haec quoque perdite tantum*. A similar weakening is found in *Met.* 451 in *aut hominum certe*, which is not conceded by metempsychosis if the soul can, and does, invest animal bodies as much as human. See also 108-110. In Empedocles the abstinence from flesh is without exception - it cannot have been otherwise as a general doctrine based on metempsychosis in Pythagoras, unless it was thought that the soul did not pass into certain kinds of animals. Of this there is no evidence whatever.

11. Cp. Empedocles fr. 136, 137 and 139.

12. That meat is food of animals - and of savage animals at that (xv. 83-87); the disgusting thought of stuffing flesh in flesh, with one greedy body growing fat with the food gained from another (88-90); that some animals killed served mankind (120-121; 141-142); that killing animals is not far short of murdering men (464-469) These and suchlike arguments belonged with the great debate which went on on the avoidance of flesh in post-Classical times between the philosophical schools and influenced such works as Plutarch's *De Esu Carnium* and Porphyry's *De Abstentione*. The controversial evidence on Pythagorean abstinence from flesh originates with Aristoxenus-

13. iv. i. 136-146

14. iv. i. 131

15. iv. i. 131-132

16. iv. i. 136-146

The context in which Ovid gives the doctrine of Pythagoras is a verbose harrangue attributed to the philosopher [who was himself, incidentally, reputed for recommending silence on Pythagorean matters]¹⁷ and introduced into the *Metamorphoses* as a part of its finale, in which metempsychosis is enlisted as a form and a part of universal metamorphosis.¹⁸ Yet despite "this ramshackle attachment of the part to the whole," the Pythagorean digression has been seen as an intrinsic, in fact a vital part of the overall structure of the *Metamorphoses*,¹⁹ representing metamorphosis as "the universal key to the secrets of both nature and history" and showing that this constant process of transition that runs through Ovid's *carmen perpetuum* is also describable in the language of science and philosophy.²⁰

In the main two themes constitute the actual speech of Pythagoras. The first of these, with which the speech begins and ends (lines 75-142 and 459-478) condemns flesh-eating, and while it has everything to do with metamorphosis, has no connection with what has gone before in the poem. It may have been designed to characterize the historical Pythagoras and thus 'frame' his central philosophy.²¹ Its second theme is the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, and it is this which, as Little says, critics have regarded as a significant structural element which gives unity and coherence to the subject matter of the *Metamorphoses*, in as much as there are obvious affinities between the phenomenon of transmigration and the phenomenon of transformation.²²

Talking of universal change (which he facilely presents as the foundation of the sort of magical or miraculous transformations he was drawing upon from mythology) Ovid builds transmigration too into all this with the observation²³

*nos quoque, pars mundi, quoniam non corpora solum,
verum etiam volucres animae sumus, inque ferinas
possumus tre domos pecudumque in corpora cond.*

"We too (change), who are part of creation, since we are not only bodies but also winged souls, and since we can find a home in the forms of wild beasts and be lodged in the bodies of cattle."

17. Sometimes called *ekphrasis*, Pythagorean silence was first referred to by Isocrates (xi. 29), and thereafter frequently by other writers. See Lamb, *V. P.* 68; 72, 94, Diog. Laert. viii. 5 etc. But some of the late sources mention addresses by him to whole populations, including women and children.

18. Ovid glibly interweaves metamorphosis with metempsychosis, and both with change in nature (*omnia mutantur*). While these may find some loose unity in the poem by the fact that all of them involve change, the change is not all on the same plane, the first belonging to the magical, the second to the metaphysical, and the third to the realistic. See Douglas Little: 'The Speech of Pythagoras in *Metamorphoses* 15 and the Structure of the *Metamorphoses*' *Hermes* vol. 98 (1970) p. 341. He agrees with H. Frankel (*Ovid. A Poet Between Two Worlds* University of California Press (1945), that the Pythagorean dialogue contradicts rather than provides an explanation for the phenomenon of transformation.

19. Otto Korn. See *Metamorphosen VIII-XV*. erklärt Otto Korn Neuausgabe der vierten Auflage von Rudolf Bhwald. Weidmann (1966); Luigi Alfonsi 'L'inquadramento filosofico delle Metamorfosi', in *Ovidiana* ed. N. I. Herescu (1957) p. 269, and 265-266.

20. Brooks Otis *Ovid as an Epic Poet* C. U. P. (1966) p. 297-302

21. Otis *op. cit.* p. 298

22. *op. cit.* p. 343

23. xv. 446-448

The presentation is typically misleading and shabby, giving the impression that souls can at death assume whatever bodies they please, moving from human to animal and animal to human, with no implication of anything like a moral or psychological determination - or at worst, even a mechanistic. For, among much else unevidenced of him, Pythagoras is made to say:²⁴

*omnia mutantur, nihil interit: errat et illinc
huc venit, hinc illuc. et quoslibet occupat artus
spiritus eque feris feris humana in corpora transit
inque feras noster, nec tempore deperit ullo.*

"All things suffer change: naught is destroyed. Our spirit wanders from this (body) to that, and from that to this, occupying whatever limbs it likes: from beasts it enters human bodies and (from human bodies) beasts - nor does it ever perish."

If not the moralistic, certainly the psychological intention of the doctrine of transmigration is brought to bear in the instance of Shylock. His "wolfish, bloody, starv'd and ravenous" nature is a carryover from his prior existence as a wolf - and no ordinary wolf, but one that went for human slaughter, as Shylock does even now in the case of Antonio. Though we have no instance strictly from Pythagorean evidence, this sort of thing is reflected in the selection of new lives in the Myth of Er of Plato's *Republic*, where, it will be recalled, Ajax opted for the life of a lion, Agammon for that of an eagle, and Thersites for an ape's, in keeping with their character and experiences.²⁵

There has been a suggestion - and a brilliant one at that, since it also reflects a prejudice entertained by some reincarnationists - that when Gratiano says 'a wolf', he shows he is thinking of a wolfish man, a murderer.²⁶ Furness goes along with this. He says,²⁷ "To me it is so singular that (coupled with its grammatical difficulty), I am inclined to suspect that there is some corruption here," and feels it not inconceivable that the whole passage from 'Thy currish spirit' (line 141) to 'Infus'd itself in thee' (line 145) "is one of those actor's additions which Hamlet denounces, and this would measurably account for its grammatical awkwardness." Accordingly he thinks S. L. Lee may have something when he surmises a connection between this play and the hanging in

24. xv. 165-168

25. 619e-620c; see 620a: *Kata synthesin gar ton proteron biou ta polla hairesthai* for the most part they followed (in the choice of new lives) the disposition of their former life".

26. Prof. George Allen unpublished notes, *ad. loc.*, cited by H. H. Furness, ed. *The Merchant of Venice* (A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare) London (1888) p 207, n. to l. 42. Aristotle (*De Anima* A3. 407b20) asked with respect to Pythagorean metempsychosis how a chance soul could occupy a chance body. See W. Y. Evans-Wentz. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* 2nd ed, London (1949) introd, p. 49 f.

27. *op. cit.* p. 207.

1594 of Dr. Lopez (i.e. 'Wolf'), a Jew at Tyburn,²⁸ which could still have been fresh in the minds of Shakespeare's audience. Furness is therefore for omitting these words, which he says can be done without injury either to the sense or the rhythm.

I see no reason for such a course. The grammatical difficulty caused by the change of construction in mid-period (resulting in a *nominativus pendens* may be awkward, but is therefore also dramatically expressive of the immediacy with which the wolf's "fell soul" sped to Shylock. The lines suspected bridge the gap between the general doctrine, which Gratiano knew as of Pythagoras, and the manifestation of what appeared proof of it in the desires of the Jew. To abstract them would not only render the transition of thought from the one to the other more abrupt, but also make Gratiano's utterance lose a great deal of its venom.

But when Furness says soon afterwards that, if Lee's suggestion is correct, "the allusion here, vague as it is, is quite pointed enough to have been caught by an audience in whose minds the event was so recent", he must credit the brilliance of the allusion to whoever the interpolator was rather than to the poet himself. But whoever may be the author of these lines - and I don't see the reasoning strong enough to take them to be anyone else's and not Shakespeare's own - it is the strength of Gratiano's suspicion that it is the soul of a man-killer wolf that is in Shylock that inclines him to the Pythagorean belief as he expresses it, i.e. that souls of *animals* infuse themselves in the bodies of men. To construe Shylock's soul to be after all the soul of another *man*, be his name Lopez and be he a murderer, is hardly the direct implication sought by the allusion. Nor does it enhance the bestiality which Gratiano observes in Shylock if he were just another man, be he a Lopez, than an actual wolf.²⁹

One recalls here Xenophanes frag 7, one of the earliest pieces of evidence on Pythagoras' doctrine of transmigration and perhaps published during the philosopher's lifetime. For we have here, even if in inversion, transmigration of the soul between man and animal.

For they say that he was passing by
When a dog was being smitten. And he said,
"Stop: do not beat him; for in his cries
I hear the voice of a man, a friend of mine".

28. See appendix 'Jews in England' p. 395-399 in Furness *op. cit.* Fredrick Hawkins, in an article on 'Shylock and Other Stage Jews' in *The Theatre* (November 1879) may have been the first to see a possible connection between the execution and the appearance of *The Merchant of Venice*. Lee's article 'The Original Shylock' appeared the next year in the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

29. The reference would well have been to a practice in sheep-rearing communities of hanging wolves caught alive in their depredations. The same may have applied to vicious dogs, whence the the proverb: "Give a dog a bad name and hang him."

In another widely authenticated instance³⁰ Pythagoras is said to have recoiled his own prior existence as Euphorbus in the times of the Trojan war by the sight of a shield hung in the temple of Apollo - an instance Shakespeare too would have been familiar with, if only from the evidence of Ovid.³¹ Gratiano's claim to knowledge of Shylock's former life is based on this sort of thing, but purely conjectural and projected from the Jew's wolfish psychology. The immediacy of the transmigration ("even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet") is more Buddhistic than Pythagorean (or Platonic), envisaging no in between sojourns in Hades or anywhere else,³² and could have been prompted by the way Ovid tells of transmigration, or simply by considerations of the dramatic. The insulting "unhallowed dam" for Shylock's mother, into the foetus of whose womb the wolf-soul "infus'd itself", continues to see Shylock himself as wolfish, and his mother as a she-wolf, notwithstanding their being clothed in "the trunks of men".

Such carry-over psychology as that upon which Gratiano bases his purported birth-recognition has been made much of by reincarnation advocates, not merely for explaining the otherwise unaccountable psychological traits in people but also of singular inborn talents. The strong presence of brutish qualities in human beings, as in the "bloody, starv'd and ravenous" desires of Shylock, easily lends itself to the conviction that here must be a case of such a nature. Indeed, as was observed earlier, it is so emphatic that Gratiano has cause to fear for his Christian orthodoxy in the face of this testimony in support of the 'opinion of Pythagoras'.

2. For Malvolio of *Twelfth Night*, however, there is no option to the Christian; for him the human soul is too noble a thing to pass into the body of an animal, so that he in no way approves of the opinion of Pythagoras. The question as put to him as a test of his sanity is, however, worded rather quaintly. Instead of being asked what Pythagoras' opinion was concerning the soul, it is put to him in an inverted form and specifically related to a bird, and a particularly foolish bird at that.³³

30. Heracleid. Pont. fr. 89 Wehrli. See Rodhe *Psyche* Engl. transl. by W. B. Hillis, London (1925) appendix x, p. 598-599 for a list of ancient writers who repeat the story.

31. xv 160-164

32. For disincarnate souls occupying the air in Pythagorean eschatology, see Aristot. *De Anima* A2-404a16. Aristotle (*An. Post.* B11- 94b33) mentions thunder frightening the dead in Hades; see also Aristox. fr. 12 Wehrli (Pythagoras reincarnated (only) every 216 years), Heracleid. Pont. loc. cit. Hieronymus fr. 42 Wehrli and parody in Aristophanes' comedy *The Pythagorist* of Pythagorean dead in Hades. For Plato see *Meno* 81a-c, *Gorg.* 523a-526d, *Rep.* (Myth of Er) 614a - 621d, *Phaedo* 80b-81d and 107c-108e etc.

33. Theobald (Nichols *Literary Illustrations* vol II p. 357) in Furness *ad loc.*: 'Wildefowle', in *Twelfth Night or What You Will* (New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare) Philadelphia (1901) p. 264. The Wildfowl, i. e. woodcock, is a proverbially silly bird; see *op. cit.* ii 5.83

- CLOWN What is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wild-fowl?
- MAL. That the soul of our grandam might haply inhabit a bird;
- CLOWN What thinks't thou of his opinion?
- MAL. I think nobly of the soul, and no way approve his opinion.
- CLOWN Fare thee well. Remain thou still in darkness: thou shalt hold the opinion of Pythagoras ere I will allow of thy wits; and fear to kill a woodcock, lest thou dispossess the soul of thy grandam. Fare thee well.³⁴

Walker finds in this piece of dialogue between the Clown and Malvolio another instance of Ovid's influence on Shakespeare.³⁵ Perhaps so. But there is here an element of satire which, while it may be self-inspired, could again very well trace back to the Classical tradition itself. Many have seen it already in the Xenophanes fragment referred to above.³⁶ But a second thing occurring in the context of such satirical treatment of the belief of transmigration clinches the likelihood that Shakespeare may also have been familiar with Lucian's excellent satirical sketch, *The Dream or The Cock*.³⁷ This is the wildfowl, or woodcock, for this bird may himself have had his origin in tradition as a prior incarnation of Pythagoras, though in the form of a somewhat different bird—a peacock.

The fragments and testimonia of a lost poem of Ennius (which itself involves a dream)³⁸ tell us that the shade of Homer, appearing to the Latin poet when he was "overcome by a gentle and peaceful sleep" (*sonno levi placidoque revinctus*),³⁹ on Mount Helicon (or it may be Parnassus) disclosed to him that his (Ennius') soul was none other than his (Homer's) own, and (no doubt because of this intimacy of relationship, indeed identity) revealed to him the secrets of the universe in accordance with Pythagoreanism. It was apparently in the course of this confidence that Homer told Ennius that he recalled he had become a peacock.⁴⁰

memini me fieri pavonem

"I remember I became a peacock"

34. *Twelfth Night* iv 11 52-63

35. Crit. 1.152; see Furness *op. cit.* p. 263

36. This fragment (apud Diog. Laert. viii. 54) is invariably treated as satirical, both on the grounds that Xenophanes was a bitter critic of beliefs to which he was hostile (frg. 11-16) and that the other five poetic passages quoted by Diogenes along with this all ridicule Pythagoras. See H. S. Long *A Study of the Doctrine of Metempsychosis in Greece from Pythagoras to Plato*, N. Jersey (1948) p. 17 (I have my reservations, however).

37. *ONEIROI H ALEKTRUON*. Lucian of Samosata born c. 120 A. D. wrote around 80 satirical pieces in Greek. This is a dialogue between his popular character, Micyllus, and his cock, whose crowing had woken him up, and who claims to be the reincarnation of Pythagoras.

38. See O Skutsch ed. *The Annals of Q. Ennius*, Oxford (1955) for the fragments and commentary.

39. Liber 1. frg. 2 (5). Skutsch *op. cit.* p. 70.

40. Frg. II (15) Skutsch.

Homer's soul passing over to Ennius obviously imitates the passage of Euphorbus' soul into Pythagoras – a claim attributed to Pythagoras himself, which was widely enough known in antiquity for Ennius to have emulated it.⁴¹ Only, where Pythagoras' recovery of this fact of his having been Euphorbus was by his remarkable power of birth-recollection (extolled by Empedocles in one of his fragments)⁴² Ennius accredits his to a 'Pythagorean dream' (*sonnia Pythagorea*).⁴³

But what of the inspiration concerning the peacock? Especially since, as Tertullian sneers, a bird with such an unpleasant voice (for all the beauty of his plumage) hardly reflects well on Homer, not to mention the poetic heredity which Ennius seeks to establish between himself and the epic poet.⁴⁴

Otto Skutsch, in his study of Ennius, thinks the easiest explanation for the peacock in Ennius is that the poet has lifted the bird off a descent of Pythagoras, where he would have a natural place, "because in Pythagorean southern Italy and apparently elsewhere the peacock is the symbol of immortality, and because he is the bird of Samos and thus connected to Pythagoras".⁴⁵ He thinks the peacock incarnation would have been used in the Pythagorean descent to split the (roughly) 600 year span between Euphorbus and Pythagoras into 300 year intervals, just as Ennius was now doing in the case of the similar span between Homer and himself.⁴⁶

What is surprising about Skutsch's theory is that, notwithstanding his willingness to use the known peacock in the Homer – Ennius descent to interpolate a peacock (of whom there is no independent evidence) in the descent of Pythagoras, he is not prepared to see the quite easy possibility, in that case, of a conflation of the two separate descents through the identification of the peacock-births in the two (that is, if Ennius himself had not, through Homer's words intended to do just that). The resultant concatenation of births, including

41. See p. 89 and n. 30 above

42. Frg. 129, perhaps from his *Katharmoi*. Diog. Laert. viii 54; see also Iambli. *V. P.* 6; and Porph. *V. P.* 30.

43. Horace Ep. ii. 1.50 f.

44. *De Anima* xxxiii.

45. 'Notes on Metempsychosis' in *Studia Enneana*, London (1963) p. 151 (republished from *Class. Philol.* vol. 54 (1959) p. 114 f) See p. 153 and *The Annals of Q. Ennius* p. 164-165; K. von Fritz 'Ennius' *RE* vol. V (1905) col. 2594 W H Friedrich (*Philol.* vol. xcvi (1948) p. 280) thinks Ennius chose the peacock because the other noble birds were already adopted, the swan for Orpheus and the eagle for Agamemnon (Plato *Rep.* 620a - b)

46. *The Annals of Q. Ennius* p. 165. A 300 year interval is unknown and eked with difficulty by Skutsch. The one popularly known is 216 (=6³ called the 'psychogonic cube') given; by Aristoxenus and some others (fr. 12 Wehrli); another of 207 is also known. The reincarnations of Pythagoras mentioned by Heraclides (*loc. cit.*) roughly accord with these-

peacock and Ennius, is to be found in Ps. Acro. Hor. c 1.28.10, with the attempt at fusion quite evident in *hic ante et...*

(Pythagoras) *praedicavit se... Euphorbum...
fuisse, qui interfectus... iterum revixit,
factus Pythagoras...; hic ante et in Homerum
dicitur renatus, postea in pavonem, postremo
iam in Ennium poetam.*

(Pythagoras) proclaimed that he was Euphorbus,
who was killed and came to live again as Pythagoras;
prior to that he was reborn as Homer, and afterwards
as a peacock, and now lastly as the poet Ennius.

What deters Skutch from conflating the two descents is perhaps his location of the peacock in either case between the two human incarnations so as to break the gap of roughly 600 years into two 300 year intervals; and he does this notwithstanding that most read Ennius to the effect that the peacock incarnation preceded Homer.⁴⁷ Besides, the evidence for 300 year intervals between births in the reincarnations of Pythagoras is rather far-fetched. However, he may be right that no pun was intended in *quintus* (as a numeral) when Persius wrote:⁴⁸

*"Lunae portum, est operae, cognoscite, clives",
cor iubet hoc Enni, postquam destertuit esse
Maeonides, Quintus pavone e Pythagoreo.*

"Acquaint yourselves with the port of Luna,
now's the time, citizens;" so bids the mind
of Ennius when roused from dreaming himself
to be Maeonides, Quintus from the Pythagorean peacock.

The chronologically acceptable sequence resulting from a conflation of the two descents and including a peacock should be: Euphorbus, peacock, Homer Pythagoras, Ennius. If this is rearranged, putting peacock before Euphorbus, it would allow a pun on 'Quintus' (fifth), while also making it possible for Homer to have recalled his having already been a peacock.⁴⁹

47. For instance Mommsen, whom Skutch discredits; see 'Notes on Metempsychosis' p. 155. n. 21

48. Persius Sat vi, 9. 11

49. The Scholiast saw a pun here, and Persius, as John Conington (*The Satires of Persius*, Oxford (1874) p. 118 n. 11 *ad. loc.*) says, might very well have intended on; but then, we should rather have had *a* than *ex* (*Quintus fiam e Sosia*; Plaut. *Amph.* 1.1 152) The series as given by Heraclides (*loc. cit.*) was Aethalides, Euphorbus, Hermotimus, Pyrrhus (a Delian fisherman) and Pythagoras, Dicaearchus (fr. 36 Wehrli) with Clearchus, has Euphorbus, Pyrandrus, Aethalides and then a beautiful harlot, Alco, before Pythagoras. (The substitution of Alco, judging by her profession, is surely out of pure malice, and may be the forerunner of Aspasia in Lucian.)

As far as is our present concern, what is important is that a bird has moved into the picture of Pythagorean transmigration, and strongly, even if he is still not quite the kind of fowl that Malvolio's woodcock is. But when next we meet the bird in Pythagorean metempsychosis, a dramatic transformation has taken place - the peacock has become a barnyard cock!

I refer of course to Lucian's excellent satire of Pythagoras and his teaching of metempsychosis, which, judging by its subject-matter, which brings in a dream, a bird and rebirth, must to some extent at least have been inspired by Ennius' famous poem. For in this sketch, *The Dream or The Cock*, Micyllus, woken up from a dream of feasting and riches by the impudent crowing of his cock, learns from the bird that he is none other than Pythagoras reborn - making Micyllus, already amazed at hearing the bird speak, exclaim.⁵⁰

"Now here's a wonder that beats the other -
a cock philosopher! Tell me, son of Mnesarchus,
how you became a cock instead of a man, and a
Tanagran instead of a Samian."

The parody of Pythagorean transmigration is further intensified when the bird goes on to assert that, after he was Pythagoras, he became the courtesan Aspasia.⁵¹ Which makes Micyllus whoop with amusement.⁵²

"Dear, dear! and your versatility has even changed
sexes? My gallant cock has positively laid eggs
in his time? Pythagoras has carded wool and spun?"

Lucian's own substitution of cock for peacock in the personal reincarnations of Pythagoras for his little dawn drama may have been occasioned by the context; but it could well have been from a knowledge of some special consideration the Pythagoreans showed for the bird, which Lucian may have known, which led to the taboo against the eating (and then perhaps also the killing) of white cocks.⁵³

Be that as it may, from barnyard cock in Lucian to woodcock in Shakespeare is an easier transition than from Ennius' peacock to Lucian's barnyard cock. The satirical humour is now in the proverbial stupidity of the bird, and in the fact that it houses, not the soul of Pythagoras, but Malvolio's happy-to-be-rid-of grandmother. The Pythagorean prohibition against killing, which

50. 4

51. 19

52. *loc. cit.*

53. Alexander apud Diog. Laert. viii. The reason given for desisting from white cocks is that they were sacred to the Moon (god) and was his suppliant; it heralds the dawn. But see Aristox. frg. 194. He says cockerels were among the favourites of Pythagoras diet! see also Diog. Laert. viii 20, Diog. Antonius apud Porph. *V. P.* 36 and Iambi *V. P.* 150, where cockerels are mentioned.

Ovid renders with Empedoclean horror as being perpetrated against our own parents and brothers, also finds its parody in the fear of releasing thereby the soul of the dreadful old lady, now safely imprisoned in the bird.

The metaphorical 'darkness' ('Remain than still in darkness..') in which the clown leaves a Malvolio who will not accept the 'opinion of Pythagoras' and harbours no fear of killing woodcocks (or anything else) is the darkness of the ignorance of Pythagorean matters, which is here equated with Hell.

"Madman, thou errest: I say, there is no darkness
But ignorance; in which thou art more puzzled than the
Egyptians in their fog".

says the clown.⁵⁴ To which Malvolio replies:⁵⁵

"I say this house is dark as ignorance, though
ignorance were dark as hell."

If Shakespeare was then here parodying Ovid by substituting 'grandam' for Ovid's 'parents and brothers', and finding humour rather where the latter expresses only revulsion, the spirit is still Lucian, and would have gone down excellently well with Shakespeare's Christian audience as it did with Lucian's non-Pythagorean pagan readers.

3. I turn now to the *As You Like It* reference. Soon after his inquiry about the cock's antecedents, Lucian's Micyllus asks the bird where he himself was at the time when Pythagoras was Euphorbus; was he too transformed? Yes, certainly, says the cock; "You were an Indian ant". And when Micyllus asks whether all that Homer says of the Trojan war was as it happened, the cock exclaims:⁵⁶

"Why, where did he get his information from, Micyllus?
When all that was going on, he was a camel in Bactria!

And what do we find when Rosalind of the *As You Like It*, prompted by the rhymes that Orlando had posted on trees, indulged in a bit of Pythagorean recollection? Says she,⁵⁷

"I was never so berimed since Pythagoras' time,
that I was an Irish rat, which I can hardly remember".

54. iv. 2. 44-46

55. iv. 47-48

56. 16-17

57. iii. 2. 174-175. Diodorus (x 6.1), like Ovid, says Pythagoras recollected being Euphorbus in Trojan times (see also Horace *Od.* I 28) and may have been one of Ovid's sources, if not Shakespeare's, for both metempsychosis and the simple life (*ten litoten zaloun*) which some (e.g. Porter and Clarke), take to be the basis of Duke Senior's philosophy in the play. As mentioned, the chronologically impossible association of Numa with Pythagoras is also found in Diodorus (viii 14. 1).

Memory of a past existence and the location of that existence in "Pythagoras time" refer the allusion to the familiar teaching. Rosalind's feat of recollection is also in character, being, even if weak, no ordinary one but a truly Pythagorean *mneme*, reaching as far back as two millenia. Pythagoras himself (according to Empedocles, who speaks of him with admiration amounting to awe), when he reached out with the full power of his mind, could see everything as far back as "ten or even twenty lifetimes of men".⁵⁸ It is upon the capacity for such *anamnesis* (the *pubbenivasananussati* of the Buddhists) that he claimed to recollect having been the hero Euphorbus in the time of the Trojan war, and that various other lives appear to have been attributed to him in tradition. Rosalind's imaginary parallel achievement is (as in the case of Pythagoras' recollection of having been Euphorbus, or his recognition of a friend as having assumed life as a dog, or for that matter Gratiano's recognition of the nature of the soul that had infused itself into Shylock's body) factitious; it is evoked by some object, quality or happening in the present existence – here the being rhymed. Her mock modesty in claiming to "hardly remember" is a pretence at realism that accentuates her jest.

But why of all rats an Irish rat? At first it appeared to me that, when taken together with metempsychosis and Pythagoras, Shakespeare may not only have known the tradition which existed among the Irish that some of their divine personages and national heroes underwent reincarnation,⁵⁹ but also that the origin of the belief among the Celts was associated in some way with Pythagoras himself. Caesar, writing on the Druids,⁶⁰ tells us that the cardinal doctrine among them was that souls do not perish at death but pass from one body to another, and that it is this belief that is the basis of their courage. He adds that they committed their sacred literature to Greek (he has his own reasons for why they

58. *loc. cit.*

59. Especially of the Tuatha De Danaan or Sidhe race. Practically all the principal figures of the Cuchulain or Red Branch cycle of Irish saga are regarded as reincarnations of earlier gods and heroes. Cuchulain is the god Lugh; Finn nac Coul was reborn after 200 years as Monagan, king of Ulster, and recalled the incident of his earlier birth of the killing of Fothad Airgdech. In the Irish Christian redaction of the legend of Tuan, Tuan informs Finnen that he was a stag, a bear, a vulture (or eagle) and a fish before he was born as the human being he was. The most notable study of the doctrine among the Irish is Alfred Nutt's 'Essay upon the Irish Vision of the Happy Other World and the Celtic Doctrine of Rebirth' in Kuno Meyer's *The Voyage of Bran* London (1897). See also W Y Evans (Wentz's) chapter on 'The Celtic Doctrine of Rebirth' (p. 358-396) in his *Fairy Faiths in Celtic Countries* Oxford (1911). In his *Buddhism in Pre-Christian Britain* (London and Glasgow (1926) p. 96 and 43) Donald Mackenzie finds the Celtic doctrine more like the Buddhist than the Greek and thinks (p. 39) that it could well have been carried there by Buddhist missionaries in Asokan times. See also Origen's statement in his *Commentary on Ezekiel* that 'The Island (Britain) has long been predisposed to it (Christianity) through the doctrines of the Druids and the Buddhists, who had already inculcated the doctrine of the unity of the Godhead.'

60. *De Bel Gal.* iv. 14. *Diod.* v. 28. 6; Divitiacus, friend and ally of the Roman people, was no less than Druid himself (*Cic De Div.* i. 90).

did this) and says that Britain figured prominently in Druid disciplines so that "today those who would study the subject more accurately journey as a rule to Britain to learn it". Later writers such as Diodorus Siculus associated this Celtic belief concerning the soul, construed as reincarnation, with the name of Pythagoras,⁶¹ and depending surely to a great extent on Herodotus' account of this Greek philosopher having been the master of the Getan (daemon) Salmoxis.⁶²

Any such reincarnation hypothesis for the Irishness of Rosalind's rat must however yield to the stronger claim of a widespread folk belief which is to the effect that in Ireland rats were killed by rhymes. Copious references to the almost proverbial practice of this rhyming of rats to death will be found in the notes *ad loc.* in the Furness edition of the *As You Like It*.⁶³ Apparently this was done by a particular variety of witches, called 'Eybiters', who had *mantrams* for the purpose, which gained their end by the 'drumming tune' of the incantation, as⁶⁴ much as by the 'gall and vinegar' of the imprecation⁶⁵ it carried. It must then remain an open question whether the Irishness of the Irish rat, as which Rosalind died in "Pythagoras' time", had, beneath its more obvious allusion, an elite reference to Celtic shape-shifting, and perhaps also its link-up in the Classical authors (surely Caesar at least) as a doctrine of transmigration with that great expounder of the it in the West, Pythagoras. The answer to this must rest of course on whether, and how much of this evidence was available to Shakespeare in translation, or he was otherwise able to acquire through that "Small Latine and Lesse Greeke" with which he has been notoriously accredited.

There are some who see an allusion to Pythagorean metempsychosis in Duke Senior's witticism in the *As You Like It* that the Jaques he and the Lords were searching for in the forest had perhaps been "transformed into a beast".⁶⁶ For instance Rick.⁶⁷ But what we have here is not metempsychosis, but metamorphosis, of which Ovid's work is full of mythological instances, which gives it its popular title. It is not metempsychosis where the new body does not originate biologically though birth and simply undergoes a change of form

61. v. 28-Amm. Marcel. xx. 9. 8. See also Strabo iv. 4. 4; Val. Max. ii. 6. 10; Lucan *Phars.* 454-457 and scholia. This may simply have been a notion of immortality. But there is also evidence of shape-shifting (*morphis metastasis*) among these peoples. See Eur. *Hec* 1265 f, where Polymestor prophesies to Hecuba that on her way to Greece she will fall into the sea and become a bitch with fire-red eyes.

62. iv. 95.

63. p. 155 on lines 174-175: 'berim'd . . . Rat'

64. So in the address 'To the Reader' at the conclusion of Jonson's *Poetaster*, "Rhyme them to death as they do Irish rats In drumming tunes" Steevens (Johnson and Steevens ed. *ad loc.*

65. Azotus "And my poets Shall with satire steep'd in gall and vinegar Rhyme em to death, as they do rats in Ireland."- Rudolph's *Jealous Lovers* v, ii.

66. ii. 8. 1-2

67. p. 43, taking it with Rosalind's specific reference to Pythagoras in vs. 172-175

(*morphēs metastasis*), as was prophesied for Hecuba by Polymestor; if anything, the Duke is looking for a Jaques who has undergone metamorphosis, not metempsychosis. Nor is the compassion that the Duke feels for the 'venison' he proposes going out to kill,⁶⁸ and Jaques' for the wounded stag he sees,⁶⁹ evoked by any considerations associated with the belief in transmigration and referable to Ovid. What the Duke feels sad about is goring "the poor dappled fools" in "their own confines", and is accordingly accused by Jaques of being a greater usurper than his brother who banished him. As for the moralizing Jaques himself, the sight of the "poor sequester'd stag" provides him more with a subject for "piercing through"

The body of the country, city court,
Yea, and of this our life.⁷⁰

If he too does have any consideration for the hunted animals, it is no different from that of the Duke; we are "usurpers, tyrants, and what's worse"

To fright the animals, and to kill them up,
In their assign'd and native dwelling-place.

The reflections are moralistic and political; they have no basis in the Pythagorean or, for that matter, any teaching of transmigration. Even as purely an argument against killing animals, it is not one that is to be found in Ovid.

68. ii. 1.21

69. ii. 1.25

70. ii. 1.58-60

71. ii. 1.60-63; cp. ii. 1.22-25