

Frigidus Lusus: Marcus Argentarius XXXIV Gow–Page (*Anth. Pal.* 11.320)

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Ἄντιγόνην ἔστεργε Φιλόστρατος· ἦν δὲ παλαισταῖς
ὁ τλήμων Ἴρου πέντε πενιχρότερος.
εὔρε δ' ὑπὸ κρυμοῦ γλυκὺ φάρμακον· ἀντία γὰρ σχῶν
γούνατ' ἐκοιμήθη, ξείνε, μετ' Ἀντιγόνης.¹

The point of the comparison to Irus in the first couplet is very obscure and has not yet been satisfactorily explained. Gow and Page compare Aristophanes' πλεῖν ἢ σταδίῳ λαλίστερα (*Ran.* 91) and ἑκατὸν σταδίοισιν ἄριστον (*Nub.* 430), commenting that "it seems unnatural here to choose so short a measure; five palms (not cubits, as Paton renders) might be fifteen inches." In addition, it is not obvious how Philostratus could be poorer than Irus, who was totally destitute. We might take this as a comically illogical way of saying that Philostratus is more than destitute, that he owns less than nothing, but that would not explain the specific measure chosen.

I see two possible lines of argument, neither of them entirely satisfactory. The first starts from Homer. Perhaps we are to understand that the Homeric Irus had five palm-breadths of property to call his own, specifically his 'reserved seat' on the steps of the palace in Ithaca (*Od.* 18.1–116), while Philostratus in our poem has no property at all. The first problem with this interpretation is that it does not entirely match the Homeric evidence. Although Antinous promises the winner of the fight between Odysseus and Irus exclusive begging-rights at the palace (lines 48f), Irus does not appear to have any such rights before the fight, since he must rely on bullying threats. Despite the discrepancy, however, this Homeric interpretation of our poem might still be taken as a legitimate inference or variant version, and it may be pedantic to worry about the details. But that still leaves one apparently fatal objection, or rather two, de-

¹ My text is taken from A. S. F. GOW and D. L. PAGE, *The Garland of Philip* (Cambridge 1968: hereafter 'Gow and Page'). There are no variants.

pending on where Philostratus is sleeping. If he is home in bed, then he is not utterly destitute and is better off than Irus, since he has a home and a bed. If, on the other hand, as ὑπὸ κρυμοῦ suggests, he is sleeping at Antigone's locked front door, then he has his own 'reserved seat', and is no worse off than Irus.

The second line of argument starts from the πέντε παλαισταί. A piece of evidence omitted by Gow and Page is πυγών, the name for a length equal to πέντε παλαισταί. I suspect that there may just conceivably be an obscure pun on πύγών and πῦγή.² Argentarius is undoubtedly (and excessively) fond of puns that are far-fetched, stupid, and often quite obscene and shameless in every way in which a pun can be shameless.³ A pun on πυγών and πῦγή would be no worse than his pun on Medes and Aetolians (Gow-Page III=*Anth. Pal.* 5.63), or his crude sexual-astrological (VII=5.105) and sexual-mythological puns (XXXIII=9.554).⁴ Saying that he is πέντε παλαισταί, *i.e.*, one πυγών, poorer than Irus might then be a very obscure way of saying that Philostratus, rejected by Antigone, has no πῦγή to call his own, as it were. This interpretation, however, besides its obscurity, also departs from the Homeric evidence, where Irus is not known to have had a girlfriend. So perhaps a third hypothesis is needed.

However that may be, there should be less doubt about the meaning of the second couplet. The pun on Antigone's name in these lines has acquired a reputation among editors as one of the stupidest in the entire *Anthology*. Dübner pronounces it an "ineptus iocus," Jacobs a "frigidus lusus," Del Re both "insop-

² Given the difference in quantity, the words are unlikely to be etymologically related; P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* I-IV (Paris 1968-80), provides no guidance on this point.

³ No doubt it is a matter of taste, but I would not draw such a clear line between Argentarius' clean and dirty puns as S. G. P. Small, "Marcus Argentarius: A Poet of the Greek Anthology," *YCS* 12 (1951) 67-145 at 86: "Paronomasia appears with such frequency in Argentarius' verse as to be very nearly the hallmark of his style. Sometimes he handles the figures with much wit and skill, but in the σκωπτικά or satiric pieces, it must be confessed, our poet more often than not turns his cleverness to the base uses of a humor so explicitly anatomical as to be revolting."

⁴ Cf. Gow and Page for details. In "A Hermetic Pun in Marcus Argentarius XII GP (*AP* 5.127)," *Hermes* 119 (1991) 497, I have suggested that epigram XII contains another.

portabile” and “inettissimo,”⁵ and the latest editor is majestically contemptuous: “Un de ces jeux de mots sans intérêt et qui n’honore pas Marcus Argentarius.”⁶ I suggest that the joke is both wittier and smuttier than previously suspected.

Lying or sitting with one’s knees bent would not, in itself, be much of a defense against either literal cold or the metaphorical chill of rejected love. On the other hand, any kind of physical activity would help with the former, and one particular kind would help with the latter: in short, I suggest that Philostratus’ γλυκὺ φάρμακον is masturbation. In another epigram (x= 5.116), Argentarius uses φάρμακον of another second-best (in his opinion) sexual practice, heterosexual sodomy. In the first couplet of another (xvi=9.286), he describes an erotic dream in rather suggestive language:

ὄρνι, τί μοι φίλον ὕπνον ἀφήρπασας, ἡδὺ δὲ Πύρρης
εἶδωλον κοίτης ὄχρετ’ ἀποπτάμενον;

What is interrupted is a sleeping dream rather than a waking fantasy, but in this case the two would not differ greatly.

The reference to bent knees can be queried as sufficient in itself to imply masturbation: I know of no literary evidence for the ancient position, and have not attempted a complete survey of the pictorial evidence, but of the masturbating satyrs that I have seen in Greek vase-paintings, all have their knees distinctly bent, whether standing, sitting, or lying.⁷ A black-figure cup by the Amasis Painter features two reclining satyrs, and an anonymous black-figure vase has two seated satyrs: all four have their knees bent.⁸ Bent knees are also associated with masturbation on a red-figure cup with a seated man by the Thalia painter

⁵ F. Dübner, *Epigrammatum anthologia Palatina* (Paris 1864–90) II 385; C. F. W. Jacobs, *Anthologia Graeca* (Leipzig 1794–1813) at IX 280f: “Non tamen cum ipsa Antigone cubuit, sed cum contractus, genibus pectori admotis, cubaret, non quidem Ἀντιγόνην ipsam, sed tamen ἀντία γόνατα habebat. Frigidus lusus: sed hic verus poetae sensus”; R. Del Re, “Marco Argentario,” *Maia* 7 (1955) 184–215 at 193.

⁶ R. Aubreton, ed., *Anthologie grecque (Livre XI)* X (Paris 1972) 183f.

⁷ This is not, of course, the same thing as the conventional use of bent knees in archaic art to indicate rapid motion: the two activities are hardly compatible.

⁸ The first in D. von Bothmer, *The Amasis Painter and his World* (Malibu 1985) 221f (no. 61, side B), and both in C. Johns, *Sex or Symbol* (London 1982) 92, pls. 73, 72 respectively.

and a Boeotian vase with a very hairy standing satyr.⁹ An aryballos by Nearchus portrays a trio of masturbating satyrs named Δόφιος, Τερπέκηλος, and Ψωλάς: one is squatting, the other two standing, but all three have bent knees.¹⁰ The only partial exception I have seen is a Gaulish beaker on which a slave, seated on a chair in the middle of an orgy, holds up a lantern with his right hand and masturbates with his left, with one knee bent, the other nearly straight.¹¹ But this second-century A.D. example offers no evidence for the Greek position in any case, and I think it likely enough that the Greeks did associate bent knees with male masturbation, so that an epigrammatist could use the former to imply the latter.¹²

The final phrase of the epigram, ἐκοιμήθη ... μετ' Ἀντιγόνης, is thus wittily ambiguous: the primary meaning, 'went to bed with Antigone', implies 'had sex with Antigone', and this is false except as a stupid pun. The secondary, and true, meaning is 'went to sleep (alone) with the help of Antigone', *i.e.*, with the help of explicit fantasies of Antigone. The anonymous referee has pointed out a second, and equally important, pun: "His onanism is literally ἀντὶ γονῆς, and Antigone becomes a speaking name. So the pun is not only on ἀντία γούνατ', but on Antigone's name as well."¹³

⁹ Cf. Johns (*supra* n.8) 140 pl. 170; K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1978) pl. BB24.

¹⁰ J. Boardman, *Athenian Black Figure Vases: A Handbook* (London 1974) pl. 50.2; a full discussion in G. M. A. Richter, "An Aryballos by Nearchos," *AJA* 36 (1932) 272–75 with pls. Xf, who explains the names as Δόφιος from δέφομαι, Τερπέκηλος from τέρπομαι + κῆλον (= "shaft of an arrow [for membrum virile?]",) and Ψώλας from ψωλός, and also records that "behind Dophios is written χαίρει, 'he is enjoying it'." Ψωλάς is Beazley's correction of Richter's Ψώλας (*BSA* 32 [1931–1932] 21).

¹¹ Johns (*supra* n.8) 141, pl. 118.

¹² R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate* (Cambridge 1951), devotes an entire chapter (174–86) to "The Knees" and their connection with generation in archaic thought.

¹³ This may help with the interpretation of the first couplet: παλαισταί would be very much in order in an autoerotic context, though that still leaves the number of "palms" (πέντε) unexplained. One would surely be more appropriate than five, if the first couplet is to prepare properly for the second.

Given the common erotic usage of the word *lusus*,¹⁴ Jacobs' description of the epigram as a "frigidus lusus" is rather more appropriate than its author perhaps intended. It would be tempting to suppose that he understood the poem as I do but was too inhibited by the restraints of his era to make his meaning entirely clear. The context of the phrase in his edition (quoted *supra* n.5) appears, however, to rule this out: his description seems only a happy coincidence. Despite M. L. West's all-too-often justified remark that "[t]he desire to find hitherto unsuspected sexual meanings in ancient literature frequently seems to blind American scholars to all considerations of relevance, style, and common sense,"¹⁵ I think a few such meanings still lurk in the less-read ancient authors.¹⁶

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¹⁴ R. Pichon, *Index verborum amatoriorum* (Hildesheim 1991: reprinted from *De sermone amatorio apud Latinos elegiarum scriptores* [Paris 1902]), distinguishes nine shades of meaning in *ludere*, including "quasi amori indulgere" and another that "saepe in turpiorem significationem vertitur."

¹⁵ M. L. West, "Melica," *CQ* n.s. 20 (1970) 205–15 at 209 n.3.

¹⁶ I wish to thank the editor and the anonymous referee for several valuable suggestions, in addition to the latter's note on ἀντὶ γωνῆς. They are not, of course, responsible for any errors that remain, and I should note that the referee was particularly dubious about the relevance of the word πυγών to the first couplet.