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Not a Freak But a Jack-in-the-Box: Philaenis In Martial, Epigram VII, 67

Sandra Boehringer

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NOT A FREAK BUT A JACK-IN-THE-BOX: PHILAENIS IN MARTIAL, *EPIGRAM VII, 67*

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ABSTRACT

How are we to understand Martial's satirical and sexual epigrams? And, especially, how are we to perceive the humour in these caricatures, which are so coarse and violent? This essay focuses on a particular figure, that of the Philaenis character, a woman whom Martial twice characterises as a *tribas*. The character is portrayed as performing various types of activities (touching on sex, sports, and food).

This study shows that a reading relying too heavily on moral considerations may keep us from perceiving an important aspect of Martial's humour. If, following the work of M. Foucault and D. Halperin, we take into account the appropriate categories for a society 'before sexuality', and stop focusing on sexuality, we can see right away that the character staged in this poem is in the first place a being in *action*. Mechanical rhythm, awkward and socially inappropriate gestures: an analysis of laughter and humor adapted to the ancient context and combined with a historicizing approach to sexual categories allows us to perceive the poem as staging not a reversal (of sex or "sexual orientation") but a comic misappropriation of the societal norms of a (male) Roman citizen.

KEYWORDS

Gender, sexuality, humor, body, homosexuality, lesbianism, *tribas*, sport.

Comment comprendre les épigrammes satiriques et sexuelles de Martial ? Et surtout comment percevoir l'humour de ces caricatures si crues et si violentes ? Cette étude se concentrera sur une figure particulière, celle du personnage de Philaenis, une femme qui se trouve désignée à deux reprises par Martial par le terme de *tribas* et qui se livre à différents types d'activités (érotiques, sportives, alimentaires).

Cet article montre qu'une lecture trop axée sur des considérations morales nous empêche de percevoir un aspect important de l'humour de Martial. Si, à la lumière des travaux de M. Foucault et D. Halperin, on prend en considération les catégories propres d'une société *before sexuality* et si l'on cesse de se focaliser sur les pratiques sexuelles, on constate tout d'abord que le personnage mis en scène dans ce poème est avant tout un être *en action*. Rythme mécanique, gestes maladroits et socialement inappropriés : une analyse du rire et de l'humour adaptée au contexte antique et combinée avec une historicisation des catégories sexuelles permet de percevoir la mise en scène, non pas d'une inversion (de genre ou d'« orientation sexuelle »), mais d'un détournement comique des normes de sociabilité du citoyen romain.

MOTS-CLÉS

Genre, sexualité, humour, corps, satire, homosexualité, lesbianisme, *tribas*, sport.

Article accepté après évaluation par deux experts selon le principe du double anonymat

There can be no doubt that Martial's epigrams were funny to the Romans, particularly when we consider what great care the poet took with his piquant final twists or "points". But what kind of humor is this exactly? And what roles do sex and eroticism play in the poem's comedy? This essay will focus on a specific epigram of Martial which has caused a lot of ink to flow among classicists: it has not only given rise to numerous interpretations – often contradictory and sometimes even absurd – but it has even made some contemporary readers laugh. But – and this is the question – is their laughter the same kind of laughter as that of the Romans [1] ?

Before looking at the poem, it is crucial to raise a few points about method. The categories of sexuality current in our contemporary societies do not match Roman perceptions of erotic practices. Similarly, as numerous scholars have shown over the last three decades – with many following the path opened up by Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* [2] – in societies "before sexuality" such practices were not assigned the same cultural and social functions as they are today [3]. Thanks to this work, the history of sexuality has become a fertile field of investigation; new aspects of ancient societies have become clear to us [4]. To posit societies "before sexuality" is to admit that what we perceive as sexuality is a "relatively recent and highly culture-specific [form] of erotic life" [5]: it does not correspond to the Greek

and Roman world of what, in an equally anachronistic fashion, one might refer to as "eroticism". This new way of apprehending sexuality, which breaks the thread that used to link ancient Greek pederasty and modern homosexuality and creates a conceptual gap between modern sexuality and erotic experience in antiquity [6], has opened up a new perspective on ancient societies: instead of looking for our modern categories in these contexts, subsequent scholarship attempts to identify the categories specific to each society and each period of antiquity, in which contemporary categories may be subdivided, distributed, or overlap. Thus, in Greece as in Rome, there is no equivalent of the modern notion of sexuality, as the set of discourses, norms and human practices involved in the personal and psychological construction of the individual, whose emergence during the 19th century was demonstrated by Michel Foucault and further elaborated by Arnold I. Davidson [7]. The set of practices that we group under the heading of "sexual" emerge from various cultural fields, and can be culturally tied to or integrated with areas that can seem, to a western scholar of the 21st century, very distant from what we now call "sexuality". This discovery renders obsolete any attempt to categorize ancient practices through the opposition between "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality", and any impulse to establish delimited and consistent "sexual norms" that would apply to all areas of human activity [8].

[1] I warmly thank Ruby Blondell, for her friendship, her sound advice, and for help with translating the text, and Kirk Ormand for his enthusiastic support. A big thank you to Marjolaine Fourton for her invaluable collaboration and her "artistic eye", which made a significant contribution in understanding the text, and to Thais Breton for her indispensable assistance and for editing the video.

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the *Society for Classical Studies* in New Orleans on January 9, 2015, as part of a panel organized by Ruby Blondell and Kate Topper. Talking about laughter, sex, and humor in the tragic month of January 2015 took on a special resonance, underlining, if it were still necessary to do so, the vital political dimension of these topics.

[2] FOUCAULT 1976 and 1984.

[3] For this concept, see the pioneering work of David Halperin, John Winkler & Froma Zeitlin entitled *Before*

Sexuality. The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient World (HALPERIN *et alii* 1990, French translation forthcoming from Epel).

[4] Among all the recent publications, see especially the collections by MASTERSON, RABINOWITZ & ROBSON 2015; BLONDELL & ORMAND 2015; HUBBARD 2014.

[5] HALPERIN 1990: 9.

[6] HALPERIN 1990.

[7] DAVIDSON 1987 and FOUCAULT 1976.

[8] In brief, the term *homosexuality*, which first emerged in 1869 in German with reference to men, took on, in the late nineteenth century, both psychological and clinical connotations. It was not initially used in opposition to heterosexuality, which, for its part, first emerged in 1892 (for a history of this concept, see KATZ 1995).

In societies “before sexuality” there is no “sexuality” producing a personal identity, nor are there moral rules that, within the framework of a biopolitics of the kind Foucault uncovered for contemporary societies, would manage populations, construct bodies and produce a shared “sexual morality”, integrated by individuals, subjectively productive and socially powerful.

Consequently, the humor of Greek or Latin discourses referring to practices that we associate with the field of eroticism cannot be interpreted according to contemporary standards of what is acceptable or not, what is appropriate or risqué, what is shameful or respectable, what is serious or inconsequential, what elicits laughter and what, conversely, arouses disapproval and condemnation [9]. Nor can such humor be viewed through the prism of what some, today, associate with varying degrees of pathology or psychopathology. Instead, our reading calls for a complete transcultural translation, historicizing the practices of laughter, the discursive practices of epigram in Roman culture, and the eroticism of a world “before sexuality” [10].

PHILAENIS IN EPIGRAM VII, 67

The poem by Martial that concerns us dates very likely from 92 CE [11]. *Epigram VII, 67* portrays a female character who engages in various activities, especially sexual activities, and everything suggests that the description of her various postures is preparing – or rather not preparing, not if we are speaking in terms of surprise – for a final twist or “point” even funnier than what is described in the body of the poem [12]. Here is a translation [13]:

Philaenis the tribad butt-fucks little boys
and, more raging than an erect husband,
ploughs eleven young girls in a single day.
With her clothes hoisted up, she also plays ball
and, rubbing her body down with sand,
from a confident arm swings weights
that studs would find heavy.
Now filthy from the dusty palaestra,
she takes the beatings of a well-oiled gymnastics
master.

She doesn't recline or eat
until she's vomited three liters of wine,
and thinks she can carry on this way
after wolfing down sixteen meatballs.
Then, when she's horny, she doesn't suck cocks
– not manly enough, she thinks –
but greedily devours young girls' groins.
May the gods bring you to your senses, Philaenis,
you who believe it manly to lick cunt!

Many modern commentators have thought that the poem's humor rests on the portrait of Philaenis as a *tribas* with a masculine body. They have seen in this character a physical portrayal of the active and masculine lesbian, a type of woman whose body is shaped by her sexual orientation [14]. According to such readings, it is precisely this embodiment of the butch and active woman – a woman who perceives herself as a man, a lesbian who transgresses gender roles, a freak whose behavior must be corrected – that would have elicited the laughter of Roman audiences [15]. Some have even seen in Martial's Philaenis the depiction of a ridiculous monster – a body distorted by its oversized clitoris [16]. Some of these readings similarly interpret the *cinaedi*

[9] See the demonstration by Eugene O'Connor, in this collection, on the necessity of locating the whole set of cultural practices (including reading), and not just sexuality, in their historical and social context.

[10] For Rome, see especially WILLIAMS 1990 and DUPONT & ELOI 2003.

[11] Book VII was dedicated to the Emperor Domitian. For the date and circumstances of composition, see GALÁN VIOQUE 2002: 1-8.

[12] The function of the “point” (or *sententia*) “is to produce surprise, for which the poet's entire art is what one could call an art of non-preparation: everything must be done to make sure the reader does not guess the idea with which the poem will conclude, whose essential value is to take him by surprise” (translated from MARTIN & GAILLARD 1990: 409).

[13] *Epigram VII, 67* translated by Anna Preger for this essay (the Latin is quoted below).

[14] Readings of Philaenis as a phallic and masculine lesbian are extremely common, and linked with the

interpretation of the *tribas* as suffering from a malformation of the clitoris that permits her to penetrate women and men; for a full bibliography on these interpretations see BOEHRINGER 2007: 333-335. For the most recent, see CLARKE 2007: 203-204, according to whom the poem evoked men's anxiety in face of emancipated women who dare to take power in various domains.

[15] The edition with commentary on book VII by GALÁN VIOQUE 2002 collects most of the discussions of the character's phallic nature, which Galán Vioque agrees with: the epigram is “a criticism of the disorderly life of a lesbian, whose sexuality and gluttony are unbridled. This is an example of the commonplace of ridiculing a phallic woman, a common character among the Roman novelists and in satire”. (GALÁN VIOQUE 2002: 382).

[16] Galán Vioque invokes the “unusually large clitoris” of Philaenis to explain in practical, concrete terms her sexual practices with *pueri*. He relies on the interpretation of HOWELL 1980: 298 and of SULLIVAN 1991: 206, who speak of the “phallic clitoris”.

and *pathici* of Martial's poems as homosexual men, arguing that it is their "inversion" that comes under attack in the poems and provides the crux of Martial's humor. These interpretations, based on the idea of sexual identity, tied to a "sexual orientation", are, in my opinion, anachronistic [17]. Certainly, this character is a parody of a kind of behavior, but in order to determine exactly what kind, it is necessary to take into account the full context in which this figure appears.

THE CHARACTER OF PHILAENIS IN MARTIAL

Nine of Martial's epigrams are concerned with a character named Philaenis [18]. The accounts in the various epigrams do not combine to portray a real person, nor do they create a realistic portrayal of a fictitious character. Martial constructs his characters through "types" which, as various commentators have shown, refer to a group of multiple individuals afflicted with the same traits or demonstrating similar behavior [19]. We should not be looking for any kind of chronological or narrative verisimilitude here – for instance, in book IX, Philaenis is dead, yet in book XII she features once again, perfectly alive. Each trait evoked in a poem is a facet of this character type, and each trait is sufficient but not necessary. Accordingly, if we were to make a list of the facets that feature either in combination or separately in the epigrams bearing on Philaenis, we would find the following elements: ugliness, foul odor, crude language, old age, repellent physical appearance; she is also variously depicted as one-eyed, red-headed, or a *tribas*. This is not the place for detailed analysis of the full set of nine poems, but here is one example to give an idea of the character type:

Why do I not kiss you, Philaenis? Because you're bald.

Why do I not kiss you, Philaenis? Because you're red-headed.

Why do I not kiss you, Philaenis? Because you're one-eyed.

He who kisses that, Philaenis, sucks cock [20].

The set of traits that characterize Philaenis in these epigrams turn out to be the comic inverse, point by point, of the ideal portrait of the female beloved as it appears in Roman erotic elegy [21]. These traits do not belong to the character systematically and simultaneously; we cannot affirm that Philaenis *is* always *thus* – however, each element combines to build a coherent type, that of the anti-erotic woman.

TRIBAS IN GREEK AND LATIN TEXTS

At this stage, it is important to clarify that it is not *because* Philaenis is a *tribas* that she is ugly or repulsive, or that her behavior is inappropriate; on the contrary, it is precisely *because* she embodies the character type of the anti-erotic woman that she is twice characterized as a *tribas* [22] – sexual relations between women not being an erotic theme for Roman men (unlike in contemporary western pornography, for example) [23]. The causal relationship has nothing to do with contemporary representations of sexual identity, whereby sexual identity – that famous "hidden truth" that Foucault speaks of – is seen to explain or justify an individual's behavior [24]. It is therefore anachronistic to read this satire as denouncing some kind of psychopathological deviance, and to think that its humor rests on the denunciation of a Philaenis who is "perverse" because she is homosexual [25].

[17] Note that the link between malformation of the clitoris and homosexual practice never appears in Greek or Latin medical texts. The treatise by Caelius Aurelianus, the first doctor to discuss sexual relations between women, dates from the 5th century CE – yet he does not mention any bodily difference of this kind. What ancient sources, and especially doctors, are describing, is hypersexual behavior (not "sexual orientation").

[18] *Epigrams* II, 33; IV, 65; VII, 67 and VII, 70; IX, 29, 40, 62; X, 22 and XII, 22.

[19] P. Laurens has shown that one of Martial's techniques consists of "the use of pseudonyms more or less systematically associated with fixed characters": the satire of Martial's epigrams is not "directed at individuals but against types" (translated from LAURENS 1965: 315).

[20] *Epigram* II, 33: *Cur non basio te, Philaeni? calva es. / Cur non basio te, Philaeni? rufa es. / Cur non basio*

te, Philaeni? lusca es. / Haec qui basiat, o Philaeni, fellat.

[21] On the qualities characterizing the beloved see VEYNE 1983.

[22] *Epigrams* VII, 67 and 70.

[23] On sex between women in ancient images see BOEHRINGER 2014: 143 sq.

[24] "Sexuality: the correlative of that slowly developed discursive practice which constitutes the *scientia sexualis*. The essential features of this sexuality are not the expression of a representation that is more or less distorted by ideology, or of a misunderstanding caused by taboos; they correspond to the functional requirements of a discourse that must produce its truth." (FOUCAULT 1976: 91, Eng. trans.: FOUCAULT 1978, 68).

[25] GALÁN VIOQUE 2002: 67 explains Philaenis' behavior by her "perverse sexual appetite".

In this analysis I have chosen *not* to translate *tribas*, in order to avoid any temptation to project contemporary categories onto the term (which often happens when scholars translate it as “lesbian” or “homosexual” [26]). Despite its Greek root (the verb τριβεῖν), the word is first attested in Latin. Around the same time as Martial, Phaedrus, author of the *Fables*, wrote about *tribades*, drawing a parallel between them and *cinaedi* [27]. Seneca the Elder used the word *tribades* to refer to two women together, caught in the act – a passage that, contrary to what has sometimes been claimed, does not afford the conclusion that “the” *tribas* refers to an active, masculine lesbian [28]. The following table shows subsequent occurrences of the word.

Botrys of Messana, or the famous Elephantis), Philaenis is the most often cited, and the only one for whom we have direct knowledge of passages from the work. The way she is mentioned in some ten sources, together with the few papyrus fragments of what is alleged to be her manual (*P. Oxy.* 2891 [29]), suggest that the work of Philaenis probably dated from the mid-4th century BCE, and that it was especially well known in subsequent centuries, up to the imperial period. Thus, Aristotle [30] mentions the *poiêmata* of Philaenis, and the author’s name appears subsequently in a variety of contexts [31].

In Martial’s time, in the first century CE, an epigram in the *Carmina Priapea* mentions Philaenis. It does so

1 st century CE	Phaedrus and Seneca the Elder	<i>tribas</i>
	Martial	<i>tribas</i>
2 nd century CE	Ptolemy	τριβάς
	Vettius Valens	τριβάς
	Lucian, <i>Amores</i> (Tertullian)	τριβακή (<i>fricatrix</i>)
3 rd century CE	Pomponius Porphyrio	<i>tribas</i>
	Manetho	τριβάς
4 th century CE	Hermes Trismegistus	<i>fricatrix</i>
5 th century CE	Caelius Aurelianus	<i>tribas</i>
	Hephaestion	τριβάς

Given the paucity of this evidence, we cannot rely on the context to elucidate Martial’s use of the term in this epigram. Still less can we deduce from these few uses that the *tribas* was, for the ancients, aggressive, psychologically deviant, or masculine. No more can we tell whether the term *tribas* is funny in itself.

BUT WHO IS PHILAENIS ?

The particular choice of name is also noteworthy, for Philaenis is the name of a woman believed to have written an erotic handbook, a kind of self-help book on seduction, kissing and love-making techniques. Among the female authors to whose authorship an erotic manual or treatise is attributed (Astyanassa,

in a context that is both humorous and exceptionally derogatory to Priapus, with reference to the many and varied erotic positions described in the “manual” of which she was the author [32]:

There comes in addition to these things the sign of shamelessness, this obelisque erected by my lecherous limb. Right up to it, the *puella* – I nearly said her name! – is accustomed to come with the one who shags her (*cum suo futuro*), and if she has not completed all the positions described by Philaenis (*tot figuris, quas Philaenis enarrat*), she leaves, still itching for it (*pruriosa*).

In the lines preceding this passage, Priapus listed all his misfortunes, but the worst is this uselessly erect penis which makes him a bad *fututor* [33]. The

[26] We must remember that there is no term, in either Greek or Latin, equivalent to “homosexual” or “heterosexual” today, or any terms expressing what “gay” or “lesbian” means in our western societies.

[27] Phaedrus, *Fabulae*, IV, 16.

[28] Seneca, *Controversiae*, I, 2, 23. For references to the other occurrences of these words see BOEHRINGER 2007: 272-275.

[29] The text is edited in vol. 39 of the *P. Oxy.* (Lobel 1972).

See BOEHRINGER 2015 for a bibliography of studies on Philaenis as author which follow this edition.

[30] Aristotle, *Divination in Sleep*, 464b.

[31] See the references in BOEHRINGER 2015.

[32] *Carmina Priapea*, 63, 13-18 (trans. Luc Arnault and Mark Masterson in BOEHRINGER 2015).

[33] On the sad sexuality of Priapus, see the preface to the French translation of the *Carmina Priapea* by F. Dupont and T. Éloi (DUPONT & ÉLOI 1994).



◀ Figure 1

Athlete holding weights and preparing to jump. Red figure lekythion, Bowdoin painter, 470-460 BCE, Palermo Regional Archeological Museum inv. 2135. Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen. © Wikimedia Commons.

▼ Figure 2

Pancration: an umpire intervenes with a whip. Red figure kylix, Foundry painter, 490-480 BCE, Provenance: Vulci, Italy. British Museum, inv. GR 1850.3-2.2. © Trustees of the British Museum.



young woman is unsatisfied, and her sexual frustration arises from not having tried all the positions (*figurae*) described by Philaenis. The mention of Philaenis by name is not a reference to a particular prostitute or pimp: it refers to an organized discourse, [34] which has circulated with certain consequences for the familiarity of young women (*puellae*) with erotic practices and games. Finally, at the end of the 2nd century CE, Clement of Alexandria credited her work with inspiring paintings in which figures (*σχήματα*) of love were depicted in the same manner as the exploits of Heracles [35]. Martial's choice of name should therefore be taken into account in considering how to approach this poem's humor.

A CHARACTER IN ACTION

We return now to the text, but should keep the link between physical and erotic exploits in mind for later. The first striking point is that the poem tells us

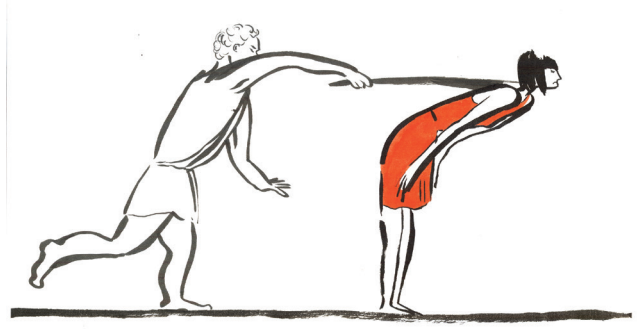
[34] Note the use of the verb *narrare* (ed. Parker 1988: *enarrat*; ed. Cazzaniga 1959: *narrat*).

[35] Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 4.61.2 (τὰ Φιλαινίδος σχήματα ὡς τὰ Ἡρακλέους ἀθλήματα).

nothing about Philaenis. Paradoxically, considering that the name could refer to a work or a well known figure, we know nothing about her life, age or status. Furthermore, we know nothing about her body, face or facial expressions. But we do know what she does: the seventeen lines of the epigram include seventeen verbs of which Philaenis is the subject, and fourteen of these are action verbs.

Pedicat pueros tribas Philaenis
 Et tentigine saevior mariti
 Udenas **dolat** in die puellas.
 Harpasto quoque subligata **ludit**,
 Et **flavescit** haphē, gravesque draucis
 Halteras facili **rotat** lacerto,
 Et putri lutulenta de palaestra
 Uncti verbere **vapulāt** magistri:
 Nec **cenat** prius aut **recumbit** ante,
 Quam septem **vomuit** meros deunces;
 Ad quos fas sibi tunc putat **redire**,
 Cum coloepia sedecim **comedit**.
 Post haec omnia cum **libidinatur**,
 Non **fellat** - putat hoc parum virile -,
 Sed plane medias **vorat** puellas.
 Di mentem tibi dent tuam, Philaeni,
 Cunnum **lingere** quae putas virile.

If we stop focusing on sexual identity, we can see that the epigram consists of a long list of actions performed by a character with no distinctive features.



▽ Figure 3

21st-Century Philaenis, sequence 5. The character is balancing the weights and preparing to jump.

▲ Figure 4

1st-Century Philaenis, sequence 6. The character is hit by a gymnastics trainer.

◀ Figure 5

21st-Century Philaenis, sequence 3. The character plays *harpastum*, covered in dust.

Drawings: Marjolaine Fourton.

[36] "As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality...We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized...less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and feminine in oneself... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species" (FOUCAULT 1976: 59, Eng. trans. 1978: 43).

[37] This evidence dates from the 5th century BCE, but in so far as Martial, in this epigram, is referring to such practices with words derived from Greek, and in so far as the athletic practices he is describing originate in Greek culture, it is not anachronistic to think that his Roman audience would visualize the image of an athlete in this way. Moreover, studies in the field have shown that certain material objects and certain practices were still quite relevant in Martial's time (for a summary see LEE 2014), even though, as CORDIER 2005 has underlined (see below), the moral evaluation and social representation of certain practices had, of course, evolved (see the studies collected in CHRISTESEN & KYLE 2014).

[38] This ball game involved two opposed teams. It is described by Athenaeus at *Deipnosophistae* I, 14F-15A. Martial is the only Roman author to mention it. GALÁN VIOQUE 2002: 233 notes that in the poems where he does so it is a dusty business (using words derived from *pulvis*).

(All we are told, in three instances, is the contents of her thoughts (*putat*), whose absurdity is heavily hinted at.) Martial's audience is not being asked to imagine a character with a thick-set or distorted body, a representative of a *species* – to use Michel Foucault's expression in his famous *The Will to Knowledge*, in which he discusses the indiscreet anatomy of the homosexual [36]. What Martial presents, rather, are actions.

The use of specific detail (mentioning concrete objects, using adverbs to characterize gestures) creates an impression of these actions as rapid images, which the author provides for his audience to "see" in their imaginations. These are sometimes familiar images from Greek sporting activities, like vase-paintings showing an athlete jumping with weights (fig. 1) or an umpire intervening with his whip (fig. 2) [37].

Scenes representing *harpastum* players are also relevant. This was a violent game that entailed pushing the other players into the melée in order to catch the ball, which made the participants exceptionally dirty [38]. But the epigram superimposes on these familiar associations the image of an active woman, stringing together by herself all these actions. Here in a transcultural visual translation, is the string of images that the poem suggests (fig. 3-4-5)



Figure 6: a man, probably drunk, is about to throw up in a krater. He is assisted by a young slave who holds his head. Red figure kylix, Brygos painter, 500-470 BCE, National Museum of Denmark. Photo: Stefani Bolognini. © Wikimedia Commons.

But the images in Martial's epigram do not simply follow each other like a series of exercises that the athletes are to complete one after another, in a logical way, as if governed by the rules of a contest. Rather, the epigram's rapid succession of verbs does not give the audience enough time to "observe" a scene, presenting, instead, an accumulation of multifarious actions involving a variety of partners.

Traditional sporting activities are followed by images of the body in postures that are only rarely represented in images (vomiting, gluttony). It is true that Greek pottery sometimes represents people on the point of vomiting (fig. 6), but Martial's character is not so euphemistic (fig. 7).

Similarly, Martial's verses state unequivocally that Philaenis "devours young women's crotches" (*medias*



Figure 8: a satyr approaches the crotch of a maenad, who is probably asleep. Fragment of a red figure kylix by the Onesimos painter, 500-490 BCE, Musée du Louvre, G 258.

Drawing: Marjolaine Fourton.

vorat puellas, v. 15). But in images from Greek and Roman antiquity, scenes of cunnilingus are extremely rare. This scene of a satyr approaching a Maenad (fig. 8), for example, hints comically at this possibility, while the scenes on the walls of the baths at Pompeii, showing two women frolicking in a way that suggests oral sex, were only visible to the building's clients [39].

In this epigram, we see a series of heterogenous actions, which have no logical connection (whether it is a matter of sex, food, or sport), together with explicit mention of activities rarely seen in the images of the period.

[39] These recently discovered frescos from the 1st century CE (62-79) were found in 1985-1987, in exceptionally damaged condition, at the suburban baths of Pompeii near the Marine Gate. One of the seven numbered erotic vignettes shows two women together (*apodyterium*, V) and another a scene with four figures including one woman appearing to give cunnilingus to another (*apodyterium*, VII). Cf. CANTARELLA 1998 and CLARKE 2003, plates 13 et 15.



Figure 7: 21st-Century Philaenis, sequence 7. The character throws up, after drinking three liters of wine. Drawing: Marjolaine Fourton.

A COMICAL RHYTHM

These actions, that I have just listed, are not only performed in succession, they are also repeated a number of times. Martial stresses plurals (*pueros*) and specifies the number of persons (*undenas puellas*: eleven, like the hendecasyllabic lines of the epigram) or huge quantities of food and drink (*septem seunces; coloephia sedecim*). These repeated actions seem to be strung together without any transition: activities related to sex, athletics, and food intertwine and follow one another in a hurried, excessive frenzy, which is far from the comportment of a civilized (male) citizen. Philaenis has sex excessively, dirties her body with dust, and eats the coarsest of foods, suitable for athletes (in contrast to the kinds of foods that would have been served to guests at an elaborate banquet).

Figure 9: Man Ray, set from the *Mr and Mrs Woodman* series, 1927.



What is presented here is a picture of a character darting around in every direction, like an uncoordinated puppet. Vomiting precedes the ingestion of food, suggesting that it is all part of an ongoing, rapid cycle. In this epigram, the emphasis is not on the body or gender, but on pure action: one thinks of Man Ray's choice when he developed the series of photo-tableaux entitled *Mr and Mrs Woodman* (fig. 9): wooden puppets without specific traits to characterize a person or designate a sex.

If we were going to produce tableaux in the manner of Man Ray's *Mr and Mrs Woodman*, we would need to make at least eleven of them (in order to illustrate the behaviors indicated by all fourteen action verbs).

Tableau 1. Philaenis butt-fucking little boys (*pedicat*).

Tableau 2. Philaenis fucking eleven young girls (*dolat* [40]).

Tableau 3. Philaenis playing *harpastum* (*ludit*).

Tableau 4. Philaenis vigorously rubbing down her oiled body with sand – a common practice among wrestlers, to improve their grip (*flavescit*)

Tableau 5. Philaenis swinging weights to perform the long jump (*rotat*).

Tableau 6. Philaenis offering herself up to the trainer's blows (*vapulat*).

Tableau 7. Philaenis vomiting (*vomuit*).

Tableau 8. Philaenis settling down to eat, recumbent (*cenat, recumbit*).

Tableau 9. Philaenis wolfing down meatballs (*comedit*).

Tableau 10. Philaenis, in heat, in search of prey (*libidinatur*).

Tableau 11. Philaenis performing cunnilingus on young girls (*non fellat... sed vorat; lingere*).

Then go back to Tableau 1.

The comparison with Man Ray's non-sexed, non-individualized mannequins is interesting. As with Martial, the *Mr and Mrs Woodman* images draw our attention to actions as opposed to the individuals performing them. But there is a notable difference: the epigram presents a series of practices associated with the Greeks. Philaenis engages in sexual activities, eats and vomits, and exercises like the toughest of men (*drauci* [41]). It is important to note the large number

[40] This word means "hew, carve (a piece of wood), polish". The sexual metaphor appears in Pomponius (*Atellanes*, 82) and later in Apuleius (*Métamorphoses*, IX, 7: a lover was "carving away at" (*dedolabat*) the wife of a man who was carving a vase). See ADAMS 1982: 147.

[41] The word *draucus* is difficult to translate since it appears nowhere except in Martial. Dupont and Éloi do not translate the term (they turn it into an antonomasia), but they think that it refers, perhaps, to a well hung

slave raised for sexual purposes (DUPONT & ÉLOI 2001: 173, n. 49). See in this connection WILLIAMS 1999: 88, n. 126, who translates *draucus* as "stud". In all five of Martial's epigrams where the term appears, *draucus* refers to someone whose penis is amazingly large and attracts attention. There is also, in two cases, a reference to his physical strength: he is the kind of person who trains in the palaestra and is seen at the baths.

of terms used in describing her that are formed from a Greek root: *tribas*, *paedicat*, *haphe*, *palaestra*, *harpastum*, *halter*, *coloephia* [42]. In this period, criticism was emerging at Rome [43] both of the expansion of gymnasiums in the city (a sign of laxity, as far back as Varro [44]) and Greek ideas about physical training (which, far from strengthening the individual, was considered by Romans to soften the body [45]).

This softening process should be understood in both a physical *and* a sexual sense in Martial: to become *mollis* is to give up one's body to pleasure at inappropriate times or places; it is to lack control of one's actions and their impact. The Roman concept of *mollitia* does *not* depend on contemporary criteria concerning activity as opposed to sexual passivity, or an opposition between penetrator and penetrated [46]. In Rome, the moral evaluation of sexual practices rested in the first place on the *modalities* of those practices. What is poorly regarded is extreme choices: hypersexuality, certainly, is despised and pilloried above all (e. g. to accumulate conquests shows a lack of self-control, an admission of civic weakness), but a citizen who proclaims the importance of chastity and rejects all luxury is not admired either, since complete austerity may be correlated with rejecting the behavior proper to a citizen in society [47]. In all these contexts, the notion of pleasure is to be understood as physical pleasure in general (without distinguishing sexuality from other bodily pleasures). What Romans are concerned with is the control of these practices and pleasures, and therefore the individual's understanding of the norms of masculine civic social life.

However, even this set of illustrations in the style of Man Ray would not adequately render the effect produced by the epigram and its fourteen actions, for there is also the rhythm suggested by the syntax. As I have tried to show, the poet's humor consists in delivering images of coarse, unsophisticated practices at breakneck speed, thus stripping the body of its

humanity even further, in a way that might evoke not only Man Ray's photos but perhaps also the marionette that Bergson describes in his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*.

Only now does Philaenis's error, her misconception, appear in its full scope. The epigram's final twist or "point" (16-17) generates a new reading of the series of actions by underlining the distance between the act and the intention behind it, between the act and the very idea of the act:

"May the gods bring you to your senses [48],
Philaenis,
you who believe it manly to lick cunt!"

She is right, of course, in thinking that being a proper Roman *vir* is something that must be constantly proved (has she been reading Judith Butler?). But one also needs to grasp the subtler points involved in the construction of a *vir Romanus*. In order to be a *vir Romanus*, it is not enough to refrain from performing fellatio; one must also be capable of judging how to behave properly – and performing cunnilingus is the most serious mistake that exists in the moral and erotic grammar of the Romans [49]. This morality includes understanding the appropriate pace, measure, and timing of one's activities, plus knowing that "Greek-style" athletics soften the body, and that what Philaenis perceives to be manly (oral sex) in fact makes her *mollissima*. Without such an understanding, there is no *mens* and there is no social manliness.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that we have come a long way from reading Philaenis as the prototype of a species, the embodiment of a psychopathology or sexual orientation. It is our contemporary gaze, informed by two centuries

[42] This is probably a very nutritious meatball. The word is rare, but also appears in Juvenal (*colyphia*, II, 53), in a passage that satirically echoes Martial's epigram. *Coloephium*, or *colyphium*, is probably a transcription of κωλυφίον, which derives from κώλον (see CHANTRAINE, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, s.v.) and refers to a meat-based dish.

[43] See Pierre Cordier's detailed study of Roman nudity (CORDIER 2005: 313-345).

[44] Varro, *Res Rusticae*, II, pr. 3.

[45] See e.g. Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, VII, 270-272 in light of the analysis by CORDIER 2005: 320-321.

[46] In this regard, Craig Williams' decision to describe certain sexual activities as "insertive" or "receptive" is

particularly relevant, since it allows us to avoid certain anachronistic interpretations (WILLIAMS 1999).

[47] For this complex approach to *mollitia* and *impudicitia* see DUPONT & ÉLOI 2001, esp. 27 sq. In this respect, I distance myself from the slightly overschematic table proposed, among others, by Holt Parker (PARKER 2001), in his article "Anthropologie and sexuality for classicists", even while viewing his work in general as indispensable, especially his invaluable contribution to BLONDELL & ORMAND 2015.

[48] Epigram VII, 67, 16: *Di mentem tibi dent tuam, Philaeni*, where the word *mens* is the unexpected twist producing the final comic point.

[49] See for example the game of "sexual riddles" in Martial, Epigram II, 28.

of *scientia sexualis*, that has led scholars to frame and isolate a sphere (sexuality) and assign it causal significance, even though this sphere is in no way distinguished from other corporeal practices in the material at hand. Martial may not speak explicitly of Philaenis the author, but by using her name he is winking, in a learned and humorous way, at the fact that these are figures (*figurae*, σχήματα) of the kind she described in her book [50]. This is not, therefore, a satirical caricature of the homosexual woman, a monster or a freak. It is our artificial separation of sexual acts from other physical activities that has provided material for numerous anachronistic readings of this poem, preventing us from understanding the source of its humor. Far from producing a moralizing discourse about “homosexuality”, far from implicitly promoting a “good sexuality”, what the poet does, rather, is provoke laughter by setting the body in motion through a series of culturally incoherent acts whose rapid succession creates the absurd, the mechanical...and the comic.

Because it is so difficult to escape our modernity, I suggest, in conclusion, that we try to approach the question via another anachronistic filter (one that employs “controlled anachronism” [51]), which I believe will prove more effective – Bergson’s analysis of laughter. According to Bergson’s analysis of the comedy of situation in theatre, one form of the comic consists in “something mechanical” encrusted upon “something living” [52]. What elicits laughter is the actions’ sheer absurdity and lack of logic, their being so completely out of phase and removed from any rational or human goal. I have already mentioned Bergson’s use of the figure of the marionette. Elsewhere, he also appeals to the idea of the Jack-in-the-box (fig. 10). As Bergson describes it, “We have all played at one time with the clown that jumps out of its box. We flatten it, it pops back up. We push it lower, it jumps back higher. You crush it under its lid, and often that makes the whole thing leap out [53].” As this anachronistic and humorous video illustrates (fig. 11), Philaenis is in fact... Martial’s Jack-in-the-box. ■



Figure 10

A Jack-in-the-box (children’s toy).
Drawing: Marjolaine Fourton.

[50] In addition to the *Carmina Priapea* and Clement of Alexandria (above), this motif also appears in Lucian, *Amores*, 28, in the form of the participle ἀσχημονούσα, which characterizes an action of Philaenis. The word is used by a character who is painting a terrifying picture of everything women are likely to descend to if they indulge in sex with each other. Everything is “dis-figured”.
[51] For this expression and approach see LORAUX 1993.
[52] BERGSON [1900] 1959: 29 (Eng. trans. 1914).
[53] BERGSON [1900] 1959: 35 (Eng. trans. 1914).

Figure 11

Video “Not a Freak, but a Jack-in-the-box,” directed by Sandra Boehringer; art by Marjolaine Fourton; editing by Thaïs Breton.

*Click here
to see
the video*



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