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# Apotropaic Humor: The Fresco of Priapus in the House of the Vettii

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Thomas R Blanton Iv. Apotropaic Humor: The Fresco of Priapus in the House of the Vettii. *Archimède: archéologie et histoire ancienne*, 2022, Le phallus dans l'Antiquité (HS n° 2), pp.167-182. 10.47245/archimede.hs02.ds1.13 . hal-03991826

**HAL Id: hal-03991826**

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Submitted on 16 Feb 2023

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Apotropaic Humor: The Fresco of Priapus in the House of the Vettii

## APOTROPAIC HUMOR: THE FRESCO OF PRIAPUS IN THE HOUSE OF THE VETTII

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### RÉSUMÉ

#### UNE FORME DE COMIQUE APOTROPAÏQUE : LA FRESQUE DU DIEU PRIAPE DE LA MAISON DES VETTII

Une célèbre fresque de la Maison des Vettii à Pompéi représentant le dieu Priape pesant son phallus semi-turgide, contrebalancé par une bourse, est généralement interprétée comme une image apotropaïque visant à protéger la *domus* de l'influence néfaste du mauvais œil. Notre article souligne les éléments humoristiques de la fresque que les études antérieures semblent avoir négligé. Il veut aussi démontrer que les spectateurs de l'époque comprenaient cet humour déguisé, dont le but était d'augmenter l'efficacité apotropaïque de l'image, en considérant les aspects humoristiques de la fresque: que ce soit la disproportionnalité artistique (par exemple

le phallus boursoufflé à l'extrême), l'utilisation de l'inversion (phallus semi-turgide plutôt que complètement en érection), l'inversion partielle du genre (Priape en costume de matrone) et le changement de fonction du membre de Priape qui, de pénalisant, devient instrument de mesure.

#### MOTS-CLÉS

Priape,  
phallus,  
mauvais œil,  
humour,  
Pompéi,  
Maison des Vettii.

A fresco at the entrance of the House of the Vettii in Pompeii that depicts the god Priapus weighing his semi-turgid phallus against a bag of coins has plausibly been interpreted as an apotropaic image, protecting the *domus* against the baneful influence of the evil eye. This article points to humorous elements of the fresco that have been largely overlooked in previous scholarship and suggests that these elements were understood to enhance the apotropaic effectiveness of the image. Humorous elements in the fresco discussed include artistic disproportionality (i.e., the grossly enlarged phallus), the use of inversion (a semiturgid rather than fully erect phallus), partial gender reversal (Priapus is dressed in matronly garb), and the transformation of the function of Priapus's member from penalty to mensuration.

#### KEYWORDS

Priapus,  
phallus,  
evil eye,  
humor,  
Pompeii,  
House of the Vettii.

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

Visitors entering the house of two wealthy freedmen, Aulus Vettius Conviva and Aulus Vettius Restitutus, would encounter an image of the god Priapus weighing his exaggerated, semiturgid phallus against a full bag of coins painted on the north side of the *fauces*, or entranceway, into the household [1]. While it is generally agreed that the image served both to ward off the evil eye and to advertise the prosperity of the Vettii, the humorous aspects of the image have received somewhat less attention [2]. This is surprising, given that John R. Clarke and others have noted the role of humor in images depicting males whose enlarged phalluses, like that of Priapus, were understood to act as *apotropaia*. The present article seeks to remedy this oversight by identifying elements of humor that were likely understood to enhance the effectiveness of the image of Priapus in protecting the house against the baneful influence of the evil eye.

The argument proceeds in four steps. First, in order to appreciate why its owners might have sought protection against the evil eye, the economic context of the House of the Vettii is briefly outlined. Second, the association of the evil eye with envy regarding the fiscal success of others is discussed. Third, the use of humor in apotropaic images, particularly those depicting an enlarged phallus, is introduced. Lastly, several elements of the apotropaic humor on display in the fresco of Priapus in the House of the Vettii, which previously have been either overlooked or only mentioned in passing, are elaborated. These include plays on (dis)proportionality, inversion, partial gender reversal, and a transformation of Priapus's phallic functionality. These will be explained in due course.

## THE HOUSE OF THE VETTII IN ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The appearance of the fresco of Priapus in the *fauces* to ward off the evil eye of envy (on which, see "Envy and the Evil Eye" below) can be appreciated by first placing the image in the architectural context of the House of the Vettii and the economic situation of its owners. The house, located in Pompeii's Regio VI, occupied the southern end of block 15, and was one of the larger houses in the ancient city. The names of the owners of the house prior to the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE are securely established by a bronze seal bearing the stamp of "A. Vetti Restitut[i]" ("[property] of Aulus Vettius Restitutus"), a second bronze seal bearing the stamp of "A. Vetti Convivae" ("[property] of Aulus Vettius Conviva"), and a bronze ring with the stamp "A[ulii] V[etti] Co[nvivaes]" ("[property] of Aulus Vettius Conviva"). Stamped on the back of Restitutus's seal is the image of an amphora [3]. A poster on the exterior of the house identifies Vettius Conviva as an *augustalis* [4]. As Lily Ross Taylor indicates, "Among the men who held these titles were merchants and traders, physicians, officers in professional corporations, care-takers of temples and shrines, and assistants to government officials.... Practically every prominent freedman in towns where these institutions were known had one of these titles; many other freedmen record these titles as their only honors" [5]. Augustales served on a yearly basis, and the office entailed the duty to finance games or public works [6]. The cost of such public donations, however, was compensated by the prestige associated with the office and recognition as a benefactor [7].

[1] For the image, see fig. 6 below.

[2] Exceptions are SKINNER 2006, p. 260; MOSER 2006, p. 46; CLARKE 2007, p. 186-188; and WILLIAMS 2010, p. 100. But all treat of the humor in the Priapus fresco summarily and do not elaborate the several elements of humor identified in this article.

[3] SOGLIANO 1898, p. 252; MAU 1902, p. 3. For detailed images of the stamps, see DUNN & DUNN 2019, <https://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%20>

<01%20entrance%20p3.htm> (last accessed Apr. 20, 2020).

[4] MAU 1902, p. 321-322; JONGMAN 1988, p. 364 (citing *CIL* IV 3509).

[5] TAYLOR 1914, p. 231.

[6] TAYLOR 1914, p. 238. On the Augustales, see more recently RIVES 2003; VANDEVOORDE 2014 and 2015.

[7] For an analysis of benefaction as an exchange of financial resources for civic honors in Rome, see VEYNE 1976; and for the earlier context of classical Greece, see GYGAX 2019.

As Auguste Mau notes, “the relationship between the two owners ... is not known. They were perhaps freedmen, manumitted by the same master” [8]. Matteo Della Corte has argued that the Vettii were merchants engaged in the wine trade [9]. Frescoes portraying the production and sale of wine are featured in room q (the Room of the Cupids), just north of the peristyle, which Mau indicates “may have been used either as a dining room or as a sitting room” [10]. (See the floor plan, fig. 1.)

The images of wine production, however, appear alongside depictions of cupids minting coins and fullers bleaching fabric, and so do not necessarily indicate the trade of the owners of the house. The image of an amphora engraved on the bezel of Aulus Vettius Restitutus’s seal suggests wine production, but the evidence is not sufficient to determine the owners’ trade with certainty. Lawrence Richardson concludes that the owners “were certainly rich and seem to have been pretentious” [11].

With approximately 1,100 square meters of space on the ground floor, the House of the Vettii was among the largest in Pompeii. Building on the work of Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, Peter Oakes has created what he refers to as a “space-distribution model” to assess the distribution pattern of household sizes, measured in square meters of floor space at ground level, in samples of houses from Pompeii and Herculaneum. Oakes notes that more than half of the houses sampled occupy less than 200 square meters of space, while approximately 1/3 of houses occupy between 200 and 600 square meters. Only 5 percent of the houses sampled occupy more than 1,000 square meters of floor space. At 1,100 square meters, the House of the Vettii was among the largest houses in the sample, situating its owners squarely in the category of Pompeii’s economic elite [12].

Richardson’s opinion that the elite owners of the House of the Vettii “seem to have been pretentious” [13] receives support from the fact that they prominently displayed in the north and south sides

of the front atrium two iron and bronze strongboxes (*arca*) for the storage of coinage and other valuables (fig. 2; for the locations, see the shaded boxes flanking the impluvium, fig. 1, area c). The boxes were fastened with iron bolts to masonry foundations [14].

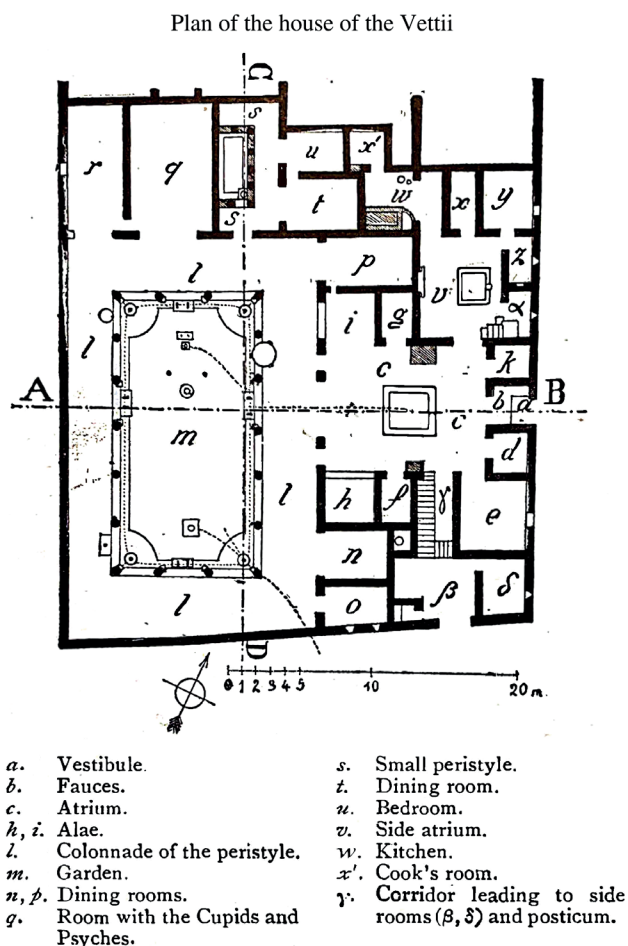


Fig. 1 : Floor plan of the House of the Vettii. Source: August Mau, *Pompeii: Its Life and Art*, p. 322 (slightly modified). Image in the public domain under article 1.1 of the Copyright Duration Directive (2006/116/EC).

[8] MAU 1902, p. 321.  
 [9] Noted in RICHARDSON 1988, p. 324.  
 [10] MAU 1902, p. 329. The floor plan with descriptions of each room can also be seen DUNN & DUNN 2019, <https://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20plan%202.htm> (last accessed Apr. 21, 2020).  
 [11] RICHARDSON 1988, p. 324.  
 [12] OAKES 2009, p. 46-56. Oakes cites data assembled in WALLACE-HADRILL 1994.  
 [13] The *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* (2020) defines “pretension” as a “claim to attention, considera-

tion, or honor because of real or alleged superiority, merit, or ability” (s. v. “pretension”). The Vettii claim consideration and prestige based on the display of wealth. Wealth was a basis on which honor and prestige were apportioned in antiquity; the first-century CE rhetorician Aelius Theon lists among praiseworthy attributes “education, friendship, reputation, official position, wealth, good children, a good death” (*Progymn.* 110; translation in KENNEDY 2003, 50).  
 [14] SOGLIANO 1898, p. 251-252 and p. 250, fig. 7; MAU 1902, p. 322; for images, see DUNN & DUNN 2019, <https://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20entrance%20p3.htm> (last accessed Apr. 20, 2020).



**Fig. 2 : Remains of the strongbox from the south side of the atrium.**

Source: DUNN & DUNN 2019, "VI.15.1, Pompeii: Restored iron and bronze strongbox". Photo by Michael Binns. © Jackie and Bob Dunn. [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com). Reprinted by permission.

Such is the sight that greeted visitors to the household once they had passed through the entranceway. The spectacle of great wealth on display in the house was completed by the large garden surrounded by a colonnaded peristyle (fig. 1; areas l, m), the bronze and marble statuary that stood in the garden, and the various frescoes that adorned the walls in each of the rooms, particularly the images of cupids engaged in various types of labor in room q (fig. 1, area q) and scenes from mythology in the exedra northeast of the peristyle (fig. 1, area p) [15].

## ENVY AND THE EVIL EYE

Precisely because it signaled their relatively high economic status as local elites (politically, however, being neither senators nor equestrians, the freedmen were subelites) [16], the two Vettii's conspicuous display of wealth bore significant potential to attract the evil eye of envy from visitors to the house. In his four-volume study of the evil eye, John H. Elliott lists seven features associated with the evil eye cross-culturally [17]:

1. Power emanates from the eye (or mouth) and strikes some object or person;
2. the stricken object is of value, and its destruction or injury is sudden;
3. the one casting the evil eye may not know he has the power [to do so];
4. the one afflicted may not be able to identify the source of the power;
5. the evil eye can be deflected or its effects modified or cured by particular devices, rituals, and symbols;
6. the belief [in the evil eye] helps to explain or rationalize sickness, misfortune, or loss of possessions such as animals or crops;
7. in at least some functioning of the belief everywhere, envy is a factor.

Although one may rightly suspect that sweeping, cross-cultural generalizations fail to appreciate the historical and geographic specificities associated with local permutations of practices and ideas [18], nevertheless Elliott's broad definition is instructive. As the following discussion will make clear, items numbered

[15] For images of the cupids in room q, see DUNN & DUNN 2019, <https://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20cupids.htm>; for images in the northeast exedra, see *ibid.*, "Exedra Situated to North-East of Peristyle", <https://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20exedra%20ne.htm> (last accessed May 20, 2022).

[16] On the potential for discrepancy between systems of classification based on wealth and those based on political status, see SCHEIDEL & FRIESEN 2009.

[17] ELLIOTT 2015-2017, vol. 2, p. 47, citing MALONEY (ed.) 1976, p. VII-VIII.

[18] See also the cautionary note in SLANE & DICKIE 1993, p. 486, n. 15.

1, 2, 5, and 7 on the list are of particular relevance to the fresco in the House of the Vettii in its Greco-Roman context [19].

As Plutarch makes clear in his *Convivial Questions*, the evil eye was believed to exert its harmful effects by emitting “ill humors” in a materialized form that, like poisoned darts, were capable of destroying the bodily health of the person upon whom a malevolent gaze fell:

Sorrow, covetousness, or jealousy makes us change color, and destroys the habit of the body; and envy [φθόνος] more than any passion, when fixed in the soul, fills the body full of ill humors, and makes it pale and ugly... Now, when men thus perverted by envy fix their eyes upon another, and these, being nearest to the soul, easily draw the venom from it, and send out as it were poisoned darts, it is no wonder, in my mind, if he that is looked upon is hurt (*Quaestionum convivialum* 5.7) [20].

Plutarch identifies envy as the primary affect that “fills the body full of ill humors” that may subsequently be transmitted outward through the eye to exert harmful effects on others.

Elliott defines envy as follows:

Envy is a feeling of distress, grief, displeasure (λύπη). It is directed at one’s peers and what they possess. It involves a desire not to obtain for oneself what these others possess (i.e., it is not emulation), but that these others be deprived of what they have that gives them pleasure. It is not a desire to gain for oneself but that others lose [21].

Cicero’s definition of *invidentia* is comparatively succinct: “Envy is distress incurred by reason of a neighbor’s prosperity” (*Tusculanae disputationes* 4.17.16) [22]. The reason why the prosperity of another could incite distress is described by Aristotle, who indicates that, faced with the evident success or prosperity of another, viewers may perceive

themselves to be deprived in comparison, and such relative deprivation could be perceived as a potential ground of reproach:

We envy those whose possession of, or success in, something is a reproach to us [and consider it] our own fault that we have missed the good thing in question; this annoys us and excites envy in us [ποιεῖ τὸν φθόνον] (*Rhetorica* 2.10, 388a) [23].

The rich decoration of the House of the Vettii, the two strongboxes prominently on display in the main atrium, and the size of the house, which placed it among the largest of those in Pompeii and Herculaneum, signaled the wealth and prosperity of the house’s owners. As Cicero and Aristotle make clear, it is precisely such signs of prosperity and success that could “annoy” and “excite envy” in onlookers who judged themselves to be deprived in comparison. The majority of the business partners, freedmen, slaves, clients, and visitors to the house probably could not have afforded to rent or purchase a household among the 5 percent of the largest in the city, and so they were potentially susceptible to envy and to the ill humors believed to fill the body as its materialized form. Thus, the very displays that signaled their prestige and prosperity also rendered the Vettii susceptible to the baneful influence of the evil eye, with all its potential to harm or kill the occupants of the house and to turn their prosperity to ruin.

Households, and particularly children, were viewed as vulnerable to the maleficent effects of envy (Plutarch, *Quaestionum convivialum* 5.7), and thus required some protection against it. Nikolaus Gonis points to a number of papyrus letters in which addressees, their households, and their children are described as ἄφθονος, “provoking no envy” [24]. Although the letters were written in late antiquity, they express the connection between envy and evil eye that is also encountered in earlier sources. A letter of the fifth century CE, for example, reads: ἀσπάζω πάντας τοὺς ἐν τῷ ἀφθόνῳ σου οἴκῳ ἀπὸ μικροῦ ἕως μεγάλου, “I greet all those in your household, which provokes no envy, from small to great” (SB XXII 15482.21ff.) [25].

[19] A perspective the evil eye with different nuances can be seen in Qohelet; see WAZANA 2007.

[20] Trans. from GOODWIN (ed.), 1874; online at CRANE (ed.), Perseus Digital Library, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plut.+Quaes.+Conv.+5.7&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0312> (last accessed on Mar. 21, 2020). For the theory of ophthalmic transmission in Plutarch in relation to the pneu-

matic theory in Heliodorus, see DICKIE 1991.

[21] ELLIOTT 2015-2017, vol. 2, p. 89.

[22] As translated by ELLIOTT 2015-2017, vol. 2, p. 90.

[23] As translated by ELLIOTT 2015-2017, vol. 2, p. 89.

[24] GONIS 2019.

[25] The translations of this and the following letter fragment are those of the author. I thank Jan Bremmer for drawing my attention to this material.

In other greetings, the adjective ἄφθονος is replaced by ἀβάσκαντος, “untouched by the evil eye”: ἀσπάζομαι τὸν ἀβάσκαντὸν σοὶ οἶκον καὶ τὰ ἀβάσκαντὰ σου παιδιά, “I greet your household, untouched by the evil eye, and your children, untouched by the evil eye” (P.Abinn. 30.23f., mid-fourth century CE) [26]. This indicates the close association between envy and the evil eye. One may plausibly infer that such letter greetings functioned as performative speech acts, aiming to bring about the very state of affairs that they described.

## THE APOTROPAIC FUNCTIONS OF THE PHALLUS

The Vettii, too, were not defenseless against the baneful influence of the evil eye. Various apotropaic practices and devices were believed to offset or negate its effects, including extending the middle finger (*digitus infamis*), inserting the thumb between the middle and ring finger in a *mano fica* gesture, sticking out the tongue, spitting three times, wearing special amulets or pendants, inscribing or reciting incantations and prayers, suspending tintinnabula (bells attached to apotropaic images) over thresholds, and ingesting or displaying plants and herbs such as garlic, rue, and dill [27].



Fig. 3 : Mosaic from the House of the Evil Eye.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, “Photographs from Antakya Archaeological Museum”. Photo by Nevit Dilmen (image cropped and color enhanced). Available under the Attribution-ShareAlike 2.5 Generic (CC BY-SA 2.5) license.

One of the most effective ways to ward off the evil eye, however, was to display the image of a phallus. As Elliott notes, “The image of the phallus and testicles (*baskanon*, *fascinum*) often was employed as a protective against the Evil Eye in particular.... Since the phallus was considered to be especially powerful against the Evil Eye, the term *fascinum* (“evil eye”) eventually came to designate the phallus itself” [28].

Because apotropaic power was attributed to them, images of phalluses were inscribed on stones paving streets, on walls, and on amulets [29]. Phalluses made of stone, wood, and terracotta were displayed prominently, while phallic-shaped tintinnabula were placed by the doorways of homes and in shops to protect goods. As Carlin Barton notes, “There were places and points of passage where one was especially vulnerable: corners, bridges, baths, doorways. The ‘liminal’ areas were highly charged, dangerous, as were places like the stage and the rostrum where one was terribly exposed to the eyes of others” [30]. Tintinnabula and other phallic symbols were thus placed to protect persons passing through or by these liminal areas, where one risked exposure to the evil eye; this is, moreover, precisely the purpose served by the image of Priapus painted in the entranceway in the House of the Vettii.

The protective value of the phallus is evident, for example, in a second-century CE mosaic from the House of the Evil Eye in Antioch, which depicts a huge evil eye under attack by (clockwise from the top) a trident, a sword, a scorpion, a snake, a canine, a centipede, a leopard, and a raven (see fig. 3).

To the left, a dwarf that is either horned or wearing a spiked crown, body and face turned away from the eye to avoid meeting its gaze, appears holding a stick in each hand; his huge, exposed phallus is directed backward toward the eye [31]. Dwarves, sharp and pointed objects, and phalluses were all understood to be effective countermeasures against the evil eye [32]. As Doro Levi notes, the sticks held by the dwarf and the horn or spiked crown on his head; the trident and sword; the fangs of the dog, feline, and snake; the pincers of the scorpion and centipede; and the beak of the raven

[26] On the translation of ἀβάσκαντος, see GONIS 2019, p. 346 and n. 9.

[27] On these methods, see ELLIOTT 2015-2017, vol. 2, p. 158-264.

[28] ELLIOTT 2015-2017, vol. 2, p. 163.

[29] See JOHNS 1982, p. 61-75; MOSER 2006; CLARKE 2014, p. 95-114.

[30] BARTON 1993, p. 171-172.

[31] SLANE & DICKIE 1993, p. 490, claim that the object pointing back from the dwarf’s head is a phallus, but this seems extremely unlikely, as the object is pointed, lacks any sign of a glans, and is colored black rather than red, as the skin (including the phallus) of the dwarf is elsewhere colored. CLARKE 2007, p. 65, more plausibly suggests that the dwarf wears a spiked crown.

[32] LEVI 1941, p. 220-232.



“belong to the category of weapons and dangerous, pointed tools to which is assigned the task of striking and wounding the evil eye” [33].

The phallus, too, falls into the category of items that could damage the evil eye by penetrating it. This is indicated clearly in a terracotta figurine from Egypt depicting what Kathleen Slane and Matthew Dickie describe as “an ithyphallic boy on the top of whose outsized phallus rests an eye; inscribed on its base are the words, ‘I have given the eye of the envious one a thorough drilling’ (ἀπετρύπησα)”; the inscription using a form of the verb ἀποτρύπῳ, “to bore through or gouge out” [34]. The inscription that appears above the scene in the Antioch mosaic, ΚΑΙ ΣΥ, is interpreted to mean “[the same to] you, too”; that is, it is meant to reflect the power of the evil eye back upon the sender [35].

But damage by penetration is not the only logic by which the phallus was viewed as apotropaic. Representing fertility, procreation, and generation, the phallus is diametrically opposed to the forces of sterility, death, and destruction marshalled by the evil eye. As Eric Csapo writes, “The phallus is the symbol of the surging life-principle” [36]. It is thus no accident that Priapus not only protects against the evil eye but is also associated with gardens, vegetation, and the production of fruit. Theodor Heinze notes that “in later periods [i.e., Late Antiquity], P[riapus] was elevated to a principle of nature (e.g. CLE 1504 = CIL XIV 3565 *pater rerum*; CIL III 139 *Pantheus*); the Gnostic Iustinus, for instance, identifies him with the creator of the world” [37]. As we will note below (“Apotropaic Humor in the Fresco of Priapus”), images of fertility and apotropaism are combined in the fresco of Priapus with which the visitor is greeted in the entranceway of the House of the Vetti.

## APOTROPAIC HUMOR

Although the phallus itself was held to be an effective *apotropaion*, humor, too, was understood to ward off the evil eye [38]. *Apotropaia* that depicted the phallus humorously were thus doubly effective. An image of Priapus sporting not one but two phalluses in the Lupanar of



Fig. 4 : Biphallic Priapus from the lupanar of Pompeii.

Source: Wikimedia Commons: “Priapus with double phallus”. Image available under the CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

Pompeii (VII.12.18-20) offers a good example (see fig. 4). Commenting on the image of Priapus in Pompeii’s lupanar, Claudia Moser writes [39],

The apotropaic power that Priapus’ member evoked was augmented by the deliberate humor of the depiction; laughter, according to a widespread belief in the ancient world, was considered an effective method to avert the Evil Eye, for “laughter is itself apotropaic” and “sexual imagery could be a source of mirth, releasing tension and anxiety”. The enormity of the phallus itself, “outside the conventional standards of beauty ... represent[ing] excess,” may incite laughter, especially when contrasted with the Greek classical ideal of a small penis [40].

[33] LEVI 1941, p. 220.

[34] SLANE & DICKIE 1993, p. 489. Definition in LSJ, suppl., s. v. ἀποτρύπῳ.

[35] SLANE & DICKIE 1993, p. 490; ELLIOTT 2015-2017, vol. 2, p. 170-174.

[36] CSAPO 1997, p. 260.

[37] HEINZE 2006b. The Justin/Iustinus reference occurs in Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 5.21.

[38] So, for example, CLARKE 2007, p. 64-67.

[39] MOSER 2006, p. 46, citing SKINNER 2006, p. 262; and

CLARKE 2014, p. 112. The image is also described in CLARKE 2001, p. 199-200, and pictured in the same work, p. 200, fig. 82. It is viewable at DUNN & DUNN 2019, <https://www.pompeii-inpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R7/7%2012%2018.htm>.

[40] On the classical Greek preference for the small penis, with its connotations of rational self-control, see DOVER 1977; BLANTON 2019, p. 130, 133. McNIVEN 1995, p. 113, writes, “Gods, heroes, and men of the upper class are in control of themselves, and their *sophrosune* [sic] is indicated in Greek art by a dainty penis.”



Fig. 5 : Gladiator tintinnabulum from Pompeii.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, "Amuleto romano in bronzo: Tintinnabulum a forma di gladiatore" (cropped). The image is in the public domain under the CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

Further explaining the connection between images of the enlarged phallus and apotropaic humor, Doro Levi writes [41],

Beings with a funny appearance in which some obscene details are accentuated are good

*apotropaia*, as well as normal beings represented in indecent attitudes, making vulgar gestures or noises.... Laughter is the opposite pole of the anguish produced by the dark forces of evil; where there is laughter, it scatters the shades and the phantasms.

Levi's view that laughter serves apotropaic purposes is supported by the second-century CE author Julius Pollux, who writes in his *Onomasticon*:

Πρὸ δὲ τῶν καμίνων τοῖς χαλκεῦσιν ἔθος ἦν γελοῖά τινα καταρτᾶν, ἢ ἐπιπλάττειν, ἐπὶ φθόνου ἀποτροπῆ. ἐκαλεῖτο δὲ βασκάνια, ὡς καὶ Ἀριστοφάνης ἔφη, πλὴν εἴ τις πρῖοιτο δεόμενος βασκανίου ἐπὶ κάμινον ἀνδρὸς χαλκέως.

It was customary for the metalworkers to hang certain laughter-provoking objects [γελοῖά τινα] in front of the ovens or to plaster [42] them (on the wall) to avert envy [i.e., the evil eye] [43]. They were called amulets [or, "protective charms": βασκάνια], as Aristophanes also said: "except if someone buys it, needing a protective charm for the oven of a metalworker" (*Onomasticon* 7.108) [44].

Such "protective charms" or amulets (βασκάνια) are said to be "laughter-provoking", "amusing", or "comical" (γελοῖα) [45]. The connection to laughter not difficult to make, as the cognate verb γελάω, "to laugh", indicates. The "laughter-provoking objects" to which Pollux refers are tintinnabula, metal images featuring one or more erect phallus, which is sometimes attached to the body of a human or animal, or portrayed with wings; bells are attached to attract the attention of onlookers and to ward off evil. One particularly humorous tintinnabulum from Pompeii depicting a gladiator, his weapons drawn in preparation to do battle with his own enlarged phallus, which takes the form of an attacking dog or pouncing panther, illustrates the point (see fig. 5) [46].

[41] LEVI 1941, p. 225; also cited in CLARKE 2001, p. 131; MOSER 2006, p. 46.

[42] LSJ, s. v. ἐπιπλάσσω (Att. -τω): "spread or plaster", "plaster up."

[43] The connection between "averting envy" (ἐπὶ φθόνου ἀποτροπῆ) and the evil eye is explained with reference to Plutarch's statement in *Quaestionum convivialium* 5.7.3 (*Moralia* 681F); the "strange look" of the *apotropaion* wards off the effects of envy by averting the gaze of the eye (see discussion of this text below). In a similar statement, Phrynichus writes, βασκάνιον: ἀνθρωποειδὲς κατασκευάσμα πρὸ τῶν ἐργαστηρίων τοῦ μὴ βασκαίνεσθαι τὴν αὐτῶν ἐργασίαν (*Praeparatio sophistica*, cited in DICKIE 1993, p. 174, n. 2). Lastly, ELLIOTT 2015-2017, vol. 2, p. 34, n. 143, notes: "The verb *apotropein* ("ward off") also

occurs here, the term that gives us the adjective/substantive "apotropaic", meaning *something that averts, wards off (evil)*." (Elliott's emphasis.)

[44] Greek text in DINDORF 1824, vol. 2, p. 87-88. The translation is mine.

[45] LSJ, s. v. γελοῖος.

[46] The image is briefly discussed in JOHNS 1982, p. 68; image: p. 64, fig. 14. BARTON 1993, p. 73; image: p. 74, fig. 1, refers to the animal as a "dog with gaping jaws". SKINNER 2006, p. 261, fig. 10.4, refers to the phallus as "wild-cat shaped". Skinner is rightly skeptical of Barton's view that the image is meant to evoke self-castration: the phallus-beast need not be severed from the body to be subdued. CLARKE 2007, p. 69, identifies the animal in question as a "rabid dog".

The gladiator tintinnabulum from Pompeii, cast in the first century BCE or first century CE, combines the apotropaic power of the phallus with the noise produced by attached bells. The apotropaic powers of noise and phallus are in turn enhanced by the humor involved in the image; the phallus, sometimes understood to behave according to an intentionality and power independent of the control of the human body to which it was attached, leaps to attack the very body from which it springs [47]. Clarke's comments are apropos:

The many bronze tintinnabula found at Herculaneum and Pompeii combine phallus and bells in outrageous configurations meant to incite laughter and distract demons. The sound of bells would distract demons just as the phallus would overpower them.... The humorous intent of the tintinnabula is clear. We find a gladiator whose phallus has morphed into a rabid dog, springing up to bite him. The stern expression on his face and the raised sword in his right hand suggest that he will—improbably—defend himself by stabbing the creature of his own loins [48].

Tintinnabula in antiquity fell under the category of (*pro*)*baskania*, a term that the second-century CE writer Phrynichus defines as “human-like object[s] (but varying a bit from the human form) that artisans hang in their workshop so that their products are not damaged by the Evil Eye” [49]. Plutarch explains how *baskania* were thought to function: “Their strange look attracts the attention of the [Evil] Eye [ἐλκομένης διὰ τὴν ἀτοπίαν τῆς ὄψεως] so that it exerts less force upon its victims” (*Quaestionum convivialium* 5.7.3; *Moralia* 681F) [50]. The “strange look” of the *baskanion*, by which it diverts the evil eye and prevents it from gazing upon and harming its victim, is constituted above all by its variation from the look and proportions of the human body. The transformation of the phallus of the gladiator into a charging beast on the tintinnabulum from Pompeii would certainly fall into this category, as would the numerous images of Priapus with his grossly enlarged phallus. Based on the statement of Julius Pollux to the effect that “laughter-provoking objects” helped to avert the evil eye, one may plausibly infer that

the use of humor in *baskania* and other apotropaic images would have served to enhance their protective value, since it would not only divert the attention of the person whose eye was evil, but also held the potential to transform the baneful gaze of envy into a mirthful gaze that accompanied spontaneous laughter.

## APOTROPAIC HUMOR IN THE FRESCO OF PRIAPUS

The fresco of Priapus that adorns the *fauces* of the House of the Vettii is frequently seen both to serve an apotropaic function and to advertise the great wealth of the Vettii. Elliott, for example, comments, “At Pompeii, a fresco of the figure of Priapus/Mercury weighing his enormous phallus against a bag of money was positioned at the entrance to the House of the Vettii to ward off the Evil Eye” [51]. Moser, for her part, elaborates the economic import of the image [52]:

In this famous fresco, Priapus and his giant phallus represent three different kinds of prosperity: growth, represented by his enormous phallus; affluence, represented by the bag of coins which he holds and weighs; fertility, symbolized by the basket of fruit at his feet. The combination of money and the large member allows the viewer to link the two, to equate the extensive quantity of each, an association evoked in the juxtaposition of the phallus and the bag of coins on the scale.

The economic significance of the image is reinforced by the associations of Priapus with Mercury, the patron god of merchants, in the *fauces*. Adjacent to the fresco of Priapus on the north wall is a small panel containing images associated with Mercury: a ram, a rooster, a caduceus, and a tortoise; a bag of coin and a vase point to the god's role as protector of merchants and commerce [53]. The placement of Mercury's symbols adjacent to the fresco of Priapus indicates a close association between the two gods, as does the bag of coins (typically a symbol of Mercury) appearing in the Priapus fresco. Moreover, like Priapus, Mercury is sometimes depicted with a grossly enlarged, erect phallus, as in the fresco from the front façade of a house with a bakery in Pompeii (IX.12.6) [54].

[47] See also SLANE AND DICKIE 1993, p. 488. CLARKE 2007, p. 70, notes: “Phalli take on a life of their own—even to the point of sprouting additional phalli. Some of the phalli fly, furnished with wings.”

[48] CLARKE 2007, p. 69-70.

[49] Phrynichus, *Praeparatio sophistica* 53.6, cited and translated in ELLIOTT 2015-2017, vol. 2, p. 34. On the terminology, see further DICKIE 1993.

[50] Trans. of ELLIOTT 2015-2017, vol. 2, p. 34.

[51] *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 194.

[52] MOSER 2006, p. 36.

[53] An image is viewable at DUNN & DUNN 2019, <https://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20entrance.htm> (last accessed on Apr. 20, 2020).

[54] Discussed in CLARKE 2007, p. 186-188 (image: p. 187, fig. 93); pictured also in DUNN & DUNN 2019, <https://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R9/9%2012%2006.htm> (last accessed on Apr. 20, 2020).

Although it is well established that the image of Priapus in the *fauces* of the House of the Vettii served to advertise the wealth of the house's owners and to guard against the evil eye, the apotropaic humor conveyed by the image has not received a detailed treatment. That said, many researchers have contributed to the study of the humor involved in the Priapus fresco, even if their discussions are all too brief [55]. The lack of a detailed treatment is somewhat surprising, given the connections between the phallus, especially the enlarged phallus, and the use of humor to augment its apotropaic power. The use of apotropaic humor in other contexts has been discussed at length by Clarke. Commenting on the floor mosaic depicting an Ethiopian bath attendant at the entrance to the *caldarium* of Pompeii's House of the Menander, for example, he writes [56]:

To the ancient Roman an Ethiopian would appear more effective against the Evil Eye than the white [man] because his un-Roman body type caused laughter—all the more so when he had an enormous phallus.... The deformities of dwarfs, pygmies, and hunchbacks made them powerful charms against the Evil Eye. Central to their "unbecomingness" is the grossly exaggerated phallus. In fact, whether attached to the hunchback, the pygmy, or the Ethiopian, whether presented in isolation or in combination with other symbols, the phallus is the most ubiquitous apotropaic image in ancient Roman floor mosaics.

The "unbecomingness" (i.e., Phrynichus's ἀτοπία) of stock characters in Roman art, whether hunchback, dwarf, or pygmy, was defined by their divergence from the idealized male form of gods, heroes, and elite men. "Unbecoming" characters differ both in size and proportion from the idealized male form, and, as Clarke notes, the presence of a grossly exaggerated phallus adds a dimension of disproportionality, enhancing the apotropaic value of the image. As Plutarch indicates, it is the "strange look" (ἡ ἀτοπία τῆς ὄψεως) of phallic *baskania* that endows them with the power to attract the evil eye, thus diverting it and preventing it from reaching its target. It is the very same sense of disproportionality that evoked laughter from the viewer of enlarged phalluses portrayed on frescoes and mosaics, as Clarke notes in relation to the Ethiopian bath attendant depicted in the House of the Menander.

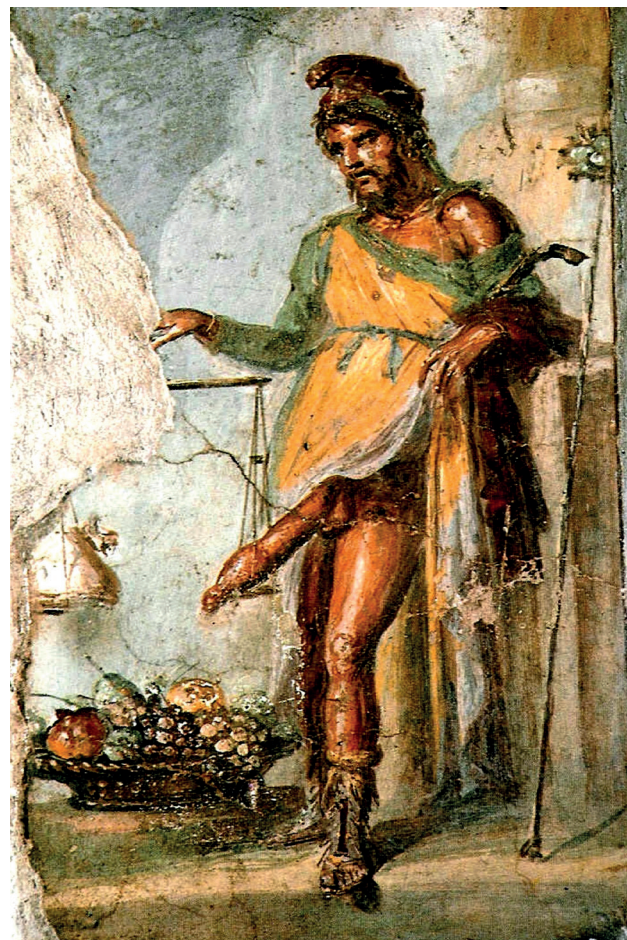


Fig. 6 : Fresco of Priapus in the entranceway of the House of the Vettii, Pompeii.

Source: Wikimedia Commons, "Fresco of Priapus, Casa dei Vettii, Pompeii". Image in the public domain under the CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

#### COMICAL DISPROPORTIONALITY

A similar sense of disproportionality is clearly present in the image of Priapus that stood in the *fauces* of the House of the Vettii (see fig. 6) [57].

Far from the "dainty penis" prized by Greek and later by Roman artists, Priapus's phallus is as long as his thigh, extending from groin to kneecap. Priapus's disproportionately large phallus must certainly have contributed to the "strange look" of the fresco, both attracting the gaze and potentially evoking laughter, making it an effective charm against the evil eye.

[55] SKINNER 2006; MOSER 2006; CLARKE 2007; WILLIAMS 2010.

[56] CLARKE 2007, p. 130-131.

[57] The discovery in Pompeii of a second, similar image of Priapus weighing his phallus was announced in 2018; see COWIE 2018.



**Fig. 7 : Ithyphallic figure inside small shrine at entrance of Modestus Bakery, Pompeii.**

Source: DUNN & DUNN 2019, "VII.1.36, Pompeii: Detail of ithyphallic plaque" (cropped). Photo by Buzz Ferebee. © Jackie and Bob Dunn. [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com). Reprinted by permission.

As Phrynichus indicated, it is the *baskanion's* variance from the actual human form—in this case, a variance based on disproportionality—that guarantees its potency against the evil eye. Disproportionality is pushed to an extreme in the priapic image that adorned the east side of the entranceway of the Modestus Bakery (VII.1.36) in Pompeii (see fig. 7).

Inside a small, stylized shrine carved in relief on a limestone block, an ithyphallic male figure (Priapus/Mercury) strides toward the right, back turned toward the viewer, holding what is perhaps a bag of coins held upside down in his left hand and an unidentified object in his right, capturing the subject's gaze: is the man holding a vessel containing oil or wine to pour as a libation to his divine phallus? The man's erect member, which precedes him as he walks, is as long as he is tall, with a glans as thick as his waist. Two enormous testes descend from the subject's groin all the way to his feet. In view of the over-the-top disproportionality of the ithyphallic figure outside the Modestus Bakery, the phallus of Priapus in the Vettii's fresco even appears somewhat modest in comparison!

The fact that the ithyphallic figure appears inside a shrine suggests that a god is depicted. Heinze notes that archaeological and iconographic evidence for "monumental buildings, apart from the image of a six-pillared temple on a coin ... (of the Lampsacene?), do not survive, but P[riapus] was also worshipped in *naískoi* (*aediculae*) [i.e., small temples, niches, or shrines]. Small gifts (flowers, fruits, cakes, wine, etc.) and fish and smaller animals (piglets, goats, etc.) constitute his chief offerings" [58]. Thus the figure inside the shrine may represent Priapus. The bag of coins, on the other hand, suggests Mercury; but as we have seen, Priapus and Mercury can be closely associated in Pompeian art.

#### THE SEMIFLACCID PHALLUS OF PRIAPUS: A COMIC INVERSION

Disproportionality, however, is not the only aspect of apotropaic humor involved in the Priapus fresco at the House of the Vettii. Another humorous aspect may be identified: Priapus's phallus, depicted semiflaccid and pointing downward, inverts the threatening aspects of the god's fully rigid, horizontal or upward-pointing member. In the *Priapea*, for example, a collection of Latin poems dating from the late first or early second century CE, the phallus of Priapus is portrayed as threatening: would-be thieves in the garden in which the statue of Priapus presides are threatened with sexual violation. Adult males are threatened with irrumation, or forcible oral sex; females with vaginal rape, and boys with anal rape [59]. As Slane and Dickie note, "Priapus threatens to ram his phallus deep into his victims, right up to the hilt" [60], referring to *Priapea* 25.6–7, which reads: *intra viscera furis ibit usque / ad pubem capulumque coleorum* ("Into the innards of the thief it [i.e., the phallus] will advance, all the way up to the hair and hilt of the balls") [61]. Although the same poem opens with a reference to the "scepter" (*sceptrum*) of Priapus's phallus, the mention of the "hilt" in line 7 mixes the metaphor by suggesting instead the image of a sword; scepters do not typically have "hilts", nor do they penetrate the bodies of transgressors. Priapus's member is elsewhere described using the metaphor of weaponry. Poem 20 provides a good example:

Jupiter rules over thunderbolts and  
Neptune is seen with trident in hand;  
Mars has a sword; Minerva a lance;

[58] HEINZE 2006b.

[59] For editions of the *Priapea*, see GOLDBERG 1992; CALLEBAT & SOUBIRAN 2012; CONDOÑER & GONZÁLEZ 2015.

[60] SLANE & DICKIE 1993, p. 493; citing, *inter alia*,

*Priapea* 25.6–7.

[61] *Priapea* 25.6–7; trans. of the author. GOLDBERG 1992, p. 149, translates: "das wird in des Diebes Eingeweiden bis / zu den Schamhaaren und zum Griff der Hoden gehen".

Bacchus in battle with thyrsus doth prance;  
Phoebus has arrows; there's Hercules' stick:  
But I am alarming because of my prick.  
(*Priapea* 20; trans. PARKER 1988)

Priapus's erect phallus is likened to the offensive weapons of other deities: Jupiter's thunderbolt, Neptune's trident, Mars's sword, and so on (cp. also *Priapea* 9, 11) [62].

The threat that the evil eye itself may be pierced, whether by weapon or by phallus, is implied in the fresco from the House of the Evil Eye in Antioch, as we have seen. Given the associations of Priapus's phallus with weaponry and penetration, it is strikingly out of character that his member is portrayed semiflaccid in the fresco in the House of the Vettii. This is hardly the rigid, pole-like member normally associated with the god [63]. The semiturgid phallus of Priapus in the Vettii's entranceway contrasts, for example, with the fully erect, upward-pointing member portrayed in a first-century CE bronze sculpture from Portici (see fig. 8). The bronze statuette, 22 centimeters tall, portrays Priapus with his member characteristically rigid, the god "in the process of pouring a libation in honor of his phallus to secure a rich harvest" [64].

The semiflaccid member of Priapus depicted in the House of the Vettii poses no threat, as it would, in such a state, be unable to penetrate the orifices of would-be thieves, or even the evil eye itself. The threat of rape or buggery is thus minimized in this image, which contributes to its comedic value: it is an image of Priapus metaphorically disarmed. This does not, however, render the image any less effective as an *apotropaion*. Quite the contrary, for it is in this instance doubly "strange": the phallus is at once both grossly enlarged and, contrary to all expectation, semiturgid rather than fully erect. This unexpected collocation of characteristics may well have elicited laughter from visitors, who could only have perceived a less-than-fully-erect phallus as being "out of place" when attached to the lusty Priapus.

## MASCULINITY UNDERMINED: PRIAPUS IN DRAG

The diminished virility of Priapus on the Vettii's *fauces* is reinforced by the matronly tunics in which he is clothed. In the Vettii's fresco, a relaxed Priapus, fitted with a Phrygian cap to emphasize his character as a "foreign" deity, native of Lampsachus, on the east side of the Hellespont in northwest Anatolia, rests his left arm atop a plastered wall, while in his right hand he holds the balance scale with which he weighs his phallus against a large bag of coin. He is clad in a saffron dress with a green right sleeve and top border (see fig. 6). The dress is fastened over the right shoulder, sloping downward to pass just over the left pectoral area and under the axilla. A thin green sash tied in a bow just below the breast completes the ensemble. Priapus's matronly attire is comparable to that of Hermaphroditus, an androgynous figure frequently depicted with feminine breasts and a phallus, similarly clad in a dress, which she/he lifts up to expose the genitalia in an *anasyromenos* ("lifting the skirts") gesture [65]. The Vettii seem to have enjoyed such gender-bending images, as a fresco depicting Hermaphroditus and Silenus adorned the south wall just by the entranceway of the Room of the Cupids (room q), while Hermaphroditus and Pan are portrayed on the south wall—again by an entranceway—of the northeast exedra, room p (fig. 1). In the latter painting, Pan recoils after his attempt to surprise the reclining "maiden" from behind was aborted: the woodland deity had caught a glimpse of the phallus and testicles, unexpected but visible on Hermaphroditus's front side [66]. Like Priapus, Hermaphroditus served to protect the liminal spaces in the House of the Vettii.

We must note, however, an important distinction between the feminized vision of Priapus and that of Hermaphroditus. With the latter figure, humor is conveyed when one's initial expectations are upset: when viewed from behind, Hermaphroditus may appear to onlookers as a beautiful female, but when viewed frontally, a phallus unexpectedly obtrudes. The

[62] See also SLANE & DICKIE 1993, p. 492.

[63] See, for example, the second-third century CE marble statue of Priapus lifting his skirts to reveal his erect phallus, now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (<https://collections.mfa.org/objects/151204>), pictured in BLANTON 2019, p. 141, fig. 10.

[64] GRANT & MULAS 1975, p. 125, 129. See also JOHNS 1982, p. 50-52, and p. 50, fig. 32.

[65] See, for example, Digital LIMC, "Hermaphroditos *anasyromenos*, ithyphallic; lordosis-theme; with coat", Musée du Louvre, Paris (inv. no. MA 4866; [http://ark.dasch.](http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/080e-76a8f1c8885fe-9)

[swiss/ark:/72163/080e-76a8f1c8885fe-9](http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/080e-76a8f1c8885fe-9)); Digital LIMC, "Hermaphroditos *anasyromenos* next to Aphrodite in a cave", Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung Berlin (inv. no. Sk 17; <http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/080e-76ad-d579a3b2c-3>); Digital LIMC, "Torso of Hermaphroditos", Tempio della Tosse ("Torrone"), Tivoli (<http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/080e-76ac761f8114c-f>; last accessed Apr. 21, 2020). For discussions of Hermaphroditus, see CLARKE 2001, p. 49-55; HEINZE 2006a.

[66] For additional discussion of these and related images, see CLARKE 2007, p. 179-184.

moment of shocked recognition that “she” may be a “he” is captured in a number of paintings and statues. When Priapus dons a matronly dress, however, the humor is based not on shocked recognition but on the logic of inversion: the usually hypermasculine Priapus, a figure who stands ready to enact his masculinity by penetrating the bodies of females, youth, and adult males alike in acts of sexual aggression, is recoded as a female—understood by the Roman mind as the penetrated rather than the penetrator [67]. The Priapus in the *fauces* would thus have been doubly strange to the Roman onlooker: his “weapon” disarmed by its lack of rigidity, and his hypermasculinity apparently reversed by his feminine attire. Such reversals, although by no means unique [68], could be expected to have elicited laughter in Roman antiquity; they relied on a stock of visual associations and characteristics that would have been viewed as incompatible or contradictory: steeped in these cultural expectations, the viewer is struck by the “absurdity” of the image. The incongruity is greeted with laughter.

#### FROM PENALTY TO MENSURATION: A COMEDIC TRANSFORMATION OF PHALLIC FUNCTIONALITY

Perhaps more humorous than the enlarged and semiturgid look of Priapus’s phallus was the use to which it was put in the fresco in the House of the Vettii. As we have seen, in the *Priapea*, the phallus of Priapus is depicted as an instrument of penalty, ready to punish thieves in the rustic gardens that the god oversees. A sense of “strangeness” or “absurdity” (ἄτοπία) is thus expressed in the image of Priapus in the House of the Vettii, as the god’s phallus appears “out of place” (ἄτοπος), resting unexpectedly atop one plate of a balance scale [69]. As Marilyn Skinner points out, “Visually, a painting of Priapus weighing his member from the House of the Vettii at Pompeii tells a corresponding joke: the counterweight of the god’s organ is a large sack of coins, and the two are nicely in balance. The phallus is worth its weight in gold” [70].



**Fig. 8 : Priapus anoints his phallus with oil.**  
 Source: Wikimedia Commons, “Statuette di priapo che versa un liquido sul proprio membro”.  
 Photo by Saiko (cropped).  
 Available under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported (CC BY-SA 3.0) license.

[67] See, for example, CLARKE 2014, p. 118-120; SANDERS 2015, p. 346-349. WILLIAMS 2010, p. 18, writes: “First and foremost, a self-respecting Roman man must always give the appearance of playing the insertive role in penetrative acts, and not the receptive role... This can justly be called the prime directive of masculine sexual behavior for Romans, and it has an obvious relationship to hierarchical social structures. For according to this scheme, penetration is subjugation (in the sense that the act is held simultaneously to be a figure for, and to effect, subjugation), and masculinity is domination.”

[68] For additional images of Priapus with semiflaccid phallus, see the second-first century BCE marble scene featuring a young Herakles copulating with a nymph,

overseen by the statue of a semiturgid Priapus, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (inv. no. 08.34d; <http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/080e-73fc7f3a48daf-d>); or the Roman cameo vase featuring an initiation of a childlike Bacchus, with a herm of a semiturgid Priapus, thyrsus in hand, close by; Museo Archeologico Firenze (inv. no. 70811; <http://ark.dasch.swiss/ark:/72163/080e-73fce5b492f3b-3>; last accessed Apr. 21, 2020).

[69] LSJ, s. v. ἄτοπία.

[70] SKINNER 2006, p. 260; with reference to Craig A. Williams, “Homosexuality and the Roman Man: A Study in the Cultural Construction of Sexuality”, PhD diss., Yale University, 1992; revised and published as WILLIAMS 2010 (see p. 100).

Yet another humorous aspect of the image may be identified. Normally one would expect a standardized stone or metal mass used as a counterweight against which to measure what rested on the plate hanging from the opposite end of the balance beam. In the Vettii's fresco, it is Priapus's own phallus that functions as the extraordinary standard against which the bag of coin is weighed. Rather than representing unbridled sexuality or the threat of rape or irrumation, the phallus of Priapus is made to serve a mercantile purpose as an instrument of mensuration, signifying the Vettii's success in business. The use of the phallus as a counterweight runs contrary to expectation, and thus likely served to elicit the laughter of onlookers who noted the strangeness and absurdity of the image.

It should not come as a surprise that in the Vettii's fresco, the joke was on the god himself. As Amy Richlin notes, Priapus, "too, could be stained and humiliated. He becomes an antihero in a literal sense: he is the virile, warlike male unmanned, placed in humiliating situations, defiled by disgusting acts and foul substances" [71]. Although not portrayed as defiled in the fresco, Priapus's virile, warlike masculinity is undermined, as much by his lack of a full erection as his demotion from a role of penal to mensural authority and his feminine attire, lifting a skirt patterned after that of Hermaphroditus *anasyromenos* ("lifting the skirts").

## CONCLUSION

The image of Priapus in the *fauces* averted the evil eye not only through the display of the god's unbecoming and disproportionate phallus, but also by portraying the god's member, contrary to expectation, as semiturgid rather than fully erect. The image amused onlookers by pressing Priapus's member into unusual service as a counterweight against the bag of coin that represented the Vettii's wealth. The inversions of artistic convention only amplified the "strange look" generated by the exhibition of Priapus's enlarged phallus, while the elements of visual humor that accompanied the image bore significant potential to deflect harm from the house and its occupants by transforming the evil eye of envy into a mirthful gaze that accompanied spontaneous laughter.

The visual joke entailed in the use of Priapus's phallus as a counterweight in a mercantile setting was uniquely well suited to adorn the House of the Vettii, freedmen merchants whose great wealth was evident not only in the large size of their house, their prominent display of two strongboxes in the front atrium, and their rich decoration of the walls of the house with frescoes, the image of Priapus in the *fauces* being the first of these to catch the eye, inviting laughter and dispelling the envy of visitors just as they entered the house. At once signaling prestige typically associated with wealth and prosperity, and at the same time averting envy that could be elicited in response to that same prosperity, the fresco succeeded in communicating what may appear to be two opposed messages: prestige and protection. Conveying both of those messages simultaneously, the fresco accomplished a fine balancing act that mirrored Priapus's own. ■

[71] RICHLIN 1992, p. 59. The author continues: "Whether or not the teller identifies himself with the stained figure, the audience can either separate themselves and laugh at the figure (that is, derive comfort from being better than

that figure) or identify with the figure temporarily and derive titillation from the temporary humiliation that they in fact do not expect to experience or admit as their own."



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## THANKS

I would like to thank Jan Bremmer, Sandra Jaeggi-Richoz, Jörg Rüpke, Peter Oakes and two anonymous reviewers for reading an earlier draft of this article and offering insightful comments and critical queries that have helped me to refine some points of the argument. Thanks also to Sandra Jaeggi-Richoz and Zachary Demko for providing the French translation of the abstract. Needless to say, any remaining faults are entirely my own responsibility.

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