

### 31. A Pointy-Headed Intellectual

Σχολαστικὸς ἐν τῷι πλέειν χειμῶνος ὄντος σφοδροῦ καὶ τῶν οἰκετῶν κλαιόντων· Μὴ κλαίετε, ἔφη· πάντα γὰρ ὑμᾶς ἐν διαθήκαις ἐλευθέρους ἀφήκα.

A professor on a sea-voyage, when there was a big storm and his slaves were weeping, said: “Don’t cry. I’ve set you all free in my will.”

This joke is Philogelos 25. The subject of the first 102 jokes in the collection is a *scholastikos*, an educated or rather over-educated man. It might be translated ‘bookworm’, ‘egghead’, ‘pedant’, ‘professor’ (or perhaps ‘per-fesser’), or ‘poindexter’. None is entirely satisfactory, though the stereotype persists.

Source: *Philogelos : Der Lachfreund*, ed. A. Thierfelder, München, 1968.

### 32. Another Joke from Augustus Caesar

Cum audisset inter pueros, quos in Syria Herodes rex Iudaeorum intra bimatum iussit interfici, filium quoque eius occisum, ait: “melius est Herodis porcum esse quam filium.”

When he had heard that Herod, king of the Jews, had ordered boys in Syria up to two years old to be killed, and that Herod's own son was among them, he said: “It's better to be Herod's pig than his son.”

The Romans' favorite meat was pork in all its forms: ham, sow's bellies, dozens of kinds of sausages, and any other cut imaginable. This no doubt made the Jewish prohibition on pork-eating seem all the more perverse.

'Syria' here is either generalized or inaccurate, since it must refer primarily to Judea, and only secondarily, if at all, to Syria proper.

Source: Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, II, 4, 11.

### 33. A Quick-Thinking Fraud

Ἄφουεῖ μάντει προσελθὼν τις ἐξ ἀποδημίας ἀνιῶν ἠρώτα  
 περὶ τῶν οἰκείων, ὁ δὲ εἶπεν· Ὑγιαίνουσι πάντες, καὶ ὁ  
 πατήρ σου. τοῦ δὲ εἰπόντος ὅτι Ὁ πατήρ μου δέκατον ἔτος  
 ἔχει ἀφ' οὗ ἀπέθανεν — ἀπεκρίνατο· Οὐδὲν γὰρ οἶδας τὸν  
 κατὰ ἀλήθειαν σου πατέρα.

Returning home from a trip abroad, someone visited an incompetent prophet and asked him about his household, and he said: “They are all healthy, including your father.” And when the man said, “But it’s been ten years since my father died”, the prophet answered “You don’t know your true father.”

This is Philogelos 201. The traveller is checking up on his household before going home, to see if unpleasant news awaits him.

Source: *Philogelos : Der Lachfreund*, ed. A. Thierfelder, München, 1968.

### 34. Another Pointy-Headed Intellectual

Σχολαστικὸς ἰδὼν πολλοὺς στρουθοὺς ἐπὶ δένδρου ἐστῶτας,  
ἀπλώσας τὸν κόλπον ἔσειε τὸ δένδρον ὡς ὑποδεξάμενος τὰ  
στρουθία.

A pedant, seeing many sparrows perched on a tree, spread out  
his cloak and kept shaking the tree to catch the birds.

The point is that shaking a tree with a cloak spread out beneath is the proper way to gather ripe fruits and nuts. Sparrows were also eaten, but other methods were obviously used to catch them. This is Philogelos 19.

Source: *Philogelos : Der Lachfreund*, ed. A. Thierfelder, München, 1968.

### 35. A Halitosis Joke

Ὄζόστομος τὴν γυναῖκα ἠρώτα λέγων· Κυρία, τί με μισεῖς;  
κακείνη ἀπεκρίνατο λέγουσα· Ὅτι σὺ με φιλεῖς.

A man with bad breath asked his wife: “Dear, why do you hate me?” And she answered: “Because you love me.”

This is Philogelos 234. There is a pun in the last word, which means not only ‘love’ but ‘kiss’.

Source: *Philogelos : Der Lachfreund*, ed. A. Thierfelder, München, 1968.

### 36. A Donkey Joke

Σχολαστικὸς θέλων αὐτοῦ τὸν ὄνον διδάξαι μὴ τρώγειν οὐ παρέβαλεν αὐτῷ τροφάς. ἀποθανόντος δὲ τοῦ ὄνου ἀπὸ λιμοῦ ἔλεγε· Μεγάλα ἐζημιώσθη· ὅτε γὰρ ἔμαθε μὴ τρώγειν, τότε ἀπέθανεν.

Wishing to teach his donkey not to eat, a pedant did not offer him any food. When the donkey died of hunger, he said: "I've had a great loss. Just when he had learned not to eat, he died."

This is Philogelos 9.

Source: *Philogelos : Der Lachfreund*, ed. A. Thierfelder, München, 1968.

### 37. Cicero on Caesar

. . . ab Androne quodam Laodiceno salutatus, cum causam adventus requisisset comperissetque — nam ille se legatum de libertate patriae ad Caesarem venisse respondit — ita expressit publicam servitutum: ἐὰν ἐπιτύχηις καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν πρέσβευσον.

. . . greeted by a certain Andron from Laodicea, he asked what had brought him to Rome and, hearing that the man had come as an envoy to Caesar to beg freedom for his city, he made open reference to the servile state of Rome by saying, in Greek: “If you are successful, put in a word for us too.”

A joke for the 2042nd anniversary of the murder of Cicero. The context is the dictatorship of Julius Caesar. The dots mark the omission of the irrelevant connection to the previous joke. The freedom of Laodicea for which Andron pleaded would of course have been purely nominal.

Source: Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, II, 3, 12.

Translation borrowed from Percival Vaughan Davies, *Macrobius: The Saturnalia*, New York and London, 1969.

### 38. A Botched Cross-Examination

Plancus in iudicio forte amici, cum molestum testem destruere vellet, interrogavit, quia sutorem sciebat, quo artificio se tuereretur. ille urbane respondit: *gallam subigo*. sutorium hoc habetur instrumentum, quod non infacete in adulterii exprobrationem ambiguitate convertit. nam Plancus in Maevia Galla nupta male audiebat.

Plancus happened to be in court as counsel for a friend and, wishing to discredit a hostile witness, whom he knew to be a cobbler, asked him how he made a living. The man neatly replied: “Grinding gall” (*gallam subigo*), for cobblers make such use of gallnuts for their work, and by the *double entendre* cleverly turned the question so as to charge Plancus with adultery, for stories were going round of his association with one Maevia Galla, a married woman.

The pun turns on the identical sound of *galla*, ‘gall’, and *Galla*, a woman’s name, and the fact that *subigere*, ‘grind, knead, plough, rub’, was used metaphorically for sexual intercourse.

Source: Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, II, 2, 6.

Translation borrowed from Percival Vaughan Davies, *Macrobius: The Saturnalia*, New York and London, 1969.

### 39. Augustus Outmanoeuvered

Solebat descendenti a Palatio Caesari honorificum aliquod epigramma porrigere Graeculus. id cum frustra saepe fecisset rursusque eum idem facturum vidisset Augustus, breve sua manu in charta exaravit Graecum epigramma, pergenti deinde ad se obviam misit. ille legendo laudare, mirari tam voce quam vultu; cumque accessisset ad sellam, demissa in fundam pauperem manu paucos denarios protulit quae principi daret. adiectus hic sermo: *νὴ τὴν σὴν τύχην, Σεβαστέ· εἰ πλέον εἶχον, πλέον ἐδίδουν.* secuto omnium risu dispensatorem Caesar vocavit et sestertia centum milia numerare Graeculo iussit.

As he went down from his residence on the Palatine, a seedy-looking Greek used to offer him a complimentary epigram. This the man did on many occasions without success, and Augustus, seeing him about to do it again, wrote a short epigram in Greek with his own hand and sent it to the fellow as he drew near. The Greek read it and praised it, expressing admiration both in words and by his looks. Then, coming up to the imperial chair, he put his hand in a shabby purse and drew out a few pence, to give them to the emperor, saying as he did so: “I swear by thy Good Fortune, Augustus, if I had more, I should give you more.” There was laughter all around, and Augustus, summoning his steward, ordered him to pay out a hundred thousand sesterces to the Greek.

I presume that the seedy Greek offers a different epigram each time. The emperor uses his entourage to handle interactions with the public.

Source: Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, II, 4, 31. Translation by Percival Vaughan Davies, *Macrobius: The Saturnalia*, New York and London, 1969.

## 40. A Literary Cockroach

Ἐχθίστη Μούσαις σελιδηφάγε λωβήτειρα  
 φωλὰς ἀεὶ σοφίης κλέμματα φερβομένη,  
 τίπτε κελαινόχρος ἱεραῖς ψήφοισι λοχάζη,  
 σίλφη, τὴν φθονερὴν εἰκόνα πλαττομένη;  
 φεῦγ' ἀπὸ Μουσάων, ἴθι τηλόσε, μηδ' ὅσον ὄψει  
 βασκάνωι ἄψηφον δόξαν ἐπεισαγάγησι.

Detested by the Muses, column-devouring mutilator, hole-haunter, eternally feeding on pilferings from wisdom's pages, O black of hue, why lurk in ambush among my sacred accounts, cockroach, moulding therein your spiteful image? Fly from the Muses, begone afar, nor with so much as a malicious glance bring me the repute of one who is of no account.

I wonder whether there is a literary metaphor in the poem. Is Euenus thinking of his critics? Some of the words seem appropriate, others less so.

As Gow and Page note, it looks as if the contents of the book (ψήφοισι, 3) are not literary but arithmetic or astrological. They also wonder about the meaning of line 4: how can the cockroach 'mold its own image' in a book? I wonder if this refers to the cockroach's habit of leaving its droppings in books. If Euenus thinks of the cockroach as no better than a piece of (its own) excrement, it might be just possible to call that an image of itself. My interpretation is difficult, but the alternatives seem worse. (Cockroaches I have known seem to prefer to damage the newest and most expensive books. It appears that just as humans feel most comfortable relieving themselves when surrounded by many square yards of clean porcelain, cockroaches prefer an expanse of pages in a brand new book.)

Text and translation taken from *The Greek Anthology: The Garland of Philip*, ed. A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page (Cambridge, 2 volumes, 1968). This is Euenus I in Gow-Page, poem IX, 251 in the Greek Anthology.

## 41. Perfect Justice

Μωρός ἀκούσας, ὅτι ἐν Ἅιδου δίκαια κριτήρια, πρᾶγμα  
ἔχων ἀπήγγξατο.

A simpleton who was involved in a lawsuit was told that the fairest judgments were those in Hades. So he hanged himself.

This joke is Philogelos 109. There are surprisingly few legal jokes in the collection.

Text quoted from *Philogelos : Der Lachfreund*, ed. A. Thierfelder, München, 1968. Translation quoted from *The Philogelos or Laughter-Lover*, translated with an introduction and commentary by Barry Baldwin, Amsterdam, 1983.

## 42. Perfect Justice

Μακροτέρωι σταυρῶι σταυρούμενον ἄλλον ἑαυτοῦ  
ὁ φθονερός Διοφῶν ἐγγύς ἰδὼν ἐτάκη.

Seeing another nearby crucified on a higher cross than himself, envious Diophon pined away.

This is Greek Anthology XI, 192. The author is Lucillius, last seen in Joke 18. No explanation needed here.

## 43. Palladas on Interdisciplinary Studies

Τέκνον ἀναιδείης, ἀμαθέστατε, θρέμμα μορίης,  
 εἶπέ, τί βρενθύηι μηδὲν ἐπιστάμενος;  
 ἐν μὲν γραμματικοῖς ὁ Πλατωνικός· ἂν δὲ Πλάτωνος  
 δόγματά τις ζητῆι, γραμματικὸς σὺ πάλιν.  
 ἐξ ἑτέρου φεύγεις ἐπὶ θάτερον· οὔτε δὲ τέχνην  
 οἶσθα γραμματικὴν, οὔτε Πλατωνικὸς εἶ.

Child of shamelessness, most ignorant, foster-child of stupidity, tell me, why do you hold your head high, though you know nothing? Among the grammarians you are a Platonist, but if someone asks about Plato's teachings, you are once again a grammarian. You flee from the one to the other, but neither do you know the grammatical art nor are you a Platonist.

Palladas (late 4<sup>th</sup> century) is one of the most distinctive voices in the Greek Anthology, where this is epigram XI, 305. In the words of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, his poems are “black, bitter, and cynically humorous”.

Meter: Elegiac couplet.

#### 44. Lucilius on a Lazy Man

Οὕτως ἔστ' ἀργὸς Πανταίνετος, ὥστε πυρέξας  
μηκέτ' ἀναστῆναι παντὸς ἐδεῖτο θεοῦ.  
καὶ νῦν οὐκ ἐθέλων μὲν ἐγείρεται, ἐν δέ οἱ αὐτῶι  
κωφὰ θεῶν ἀδίκων οὔατα μεμφόμενος.

Pantaenetus is so lazy that when he fell sick of a fever he prayed to every god never to get up again. And now he leaves his bed unwillingly, and in his heart blames the deaf ears of the unjust gods.

Text and translation from the Loeb edition of The Greek Anthology, volume IV, edited by W. R. Paton (Cambridge, MA, 1918, revised 1979). This is epigram IX, 311. Lucillius has been heard from before, in Jokes 18 and 42.

Meter: Elegiac couplet.

## 45. Lucilius Again

Εἴσιδεν Ἀντίοχος τὴν Λυσιμάχου ποτὲ τύλην,  
κούκέτι τὴν τύλην εἴσιδε Λυσίμαχος.

Antiochus once set eyes on Lysimachus' cushion, and  
Lysimachus never set eyes on it again.

As with joke 44, the text and translation are quoted from the Loeb edition of *The Greek Anthology*, volume IV, edited by W. R. Paton (Cambridge, MA, 1918, revised 1979). This is epigram IX, 315. The joke is not particularly funny, but the phrasing is very neat, with most of the same words repeated in a different order and (in some cases) slightly different forms from the first line to the second.

Meter: Elegiac couplet.

#### 46. Palladas on an Incompetent Doctor

Βέλτερον Ἡγέμονος ληιστοκτόνου ἐς κρίσιν ἐλθεῖν,  
ἢ τοῦ χειρουργοῦ Γενναδίου παλάμας.  
ὅς μὲν γὰρ φονέας ὀσίως στυγέων κατατέμνει·  
ὅς δὲ λαβὼν μισθοὺς εἰς αἴδην κατὰγει.

**Better to be judged by Hegemon, the slayer of robbers, than to fall into the hands of the surgeon Gennadius. For he executes murderers in just hatred, but Gennadius takes a fee for sending you down to Hades.**

Text and translation are quoted from the Loeb edition of *The Greek Anthology*, volume IV, edited by W. R. Paton (Cambridge, MA, 1918, revised 1979). This is epigram IX, 280. We last saw Palladas in Joke 43. The word translated ‘murder’ actually means ‘cut into pieces’: the method of execution is not entirely clear, but it is obviously more violent than hemlock.

Meter: Elegiac couplet.

## 47. A Legal Subtlety

Cascellius iuris consultus urbanitatis mirae libertatisque habebatur, praecipue tamen is locus eius innotuit. lapidatus a populo Vatinius cum gladiatorium munus ederet, obtinuerat ut aediles edicerent, nequis in harenam nisi pomum misisse vellet. forte his diebus Cascellius consultus a quodam an nux pinea pomum esset respondit: 'si in Vatinium missurus es, pomum est.'

The lawyer Cascellius had a reputation for a remarkably outspoken wit, and here is one of his best known quips. Vatinius had been stoned by the populace at a gladiatorial show which he was giving, and so he prevailed on the aediles to make a proclamation forbidding the throwing of anything but fruit in the arena. Now it so happened that Cascellius at that time was asked by a client to advise whether a fircone was a fruit or not, and his reply was: "If you propose to throw one at Vatinius, it is."

It is interesting that throwing fruit was not forbidden, and puzzling that Cascellius' client could possibly need to know whether a fircone is a fruit or not.

Source: Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, II, 6, 1.

Translation borrowed from Percival Vaughan Davies, *Macrobius: The Saturnalia*, New York and London, 1969.

## 48. Artistic Crudity

Apud L. Mallium, qui optimus pictor Romae habebatur, Servilius Geminus forte cenabat, cumque filios eius deformes vidisset, ‘non similiter’, inquit, ‘Malli, fingis et pingis’. et Mallius, ‘in tenebris enim fingo,’ inquit ‘luce pingo’.

Servilius Geminus happened to be dining at the house of Lucius Mallius, who was held to be the best portrait painter in Rome and, noticing how misshapen his host’s sons were, observed: “Your modeling, Mallius, does not come up to your painting.” “Naturally”, replied Mallius, “for the modeling is done in the dark but the painting by daylight.”

The Latin is much more pointed than any possible translation, since ‘fashion’ and ‘paint’ — *fingis* and *pingis* — are nearly identical in sound. The joke is put in the mouth of Macrobius’ character Euangelus, but I have omitted the context and the outer quotation marks.

Source: Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, II, 2, 10.

Translation borrowed from Percival Vaughan Davies, *Macrobius: The Saturnalia*, New York and London, 1969.

## 49. Argentarius Puns Again

Ποιεῖς πάντα, Μέλισσα, φιλανθῆος ἔργα μελίσσης·  
οἶδα καὶ ἐς κραδίην τοῦτο, γύναι, τίθεμαι·  
καὶ μέλι μὲν στάξεις ὑπὸ χεῖλεσιν ἠδὺ φιλεῦσα,  
ἦν δ' αἰτῆις, κέντρῳι τύμμα φέρεις ἄδικον.

You do all the deeds of the flower-loving bee, Melissa: I know this, woman, and I lay it to heart. Sweetly kissing, you drip honey down from your lips; but when you ask for things, you bring an unjust blow with your sting.

Argentarius was last seen in Joke 15. This is Argentarius II in Gow-Page, poem V, 32 in the Greek Anthology. The pun is not his worst. That will come in the next joke.

1. Melissa means “bee”.

3. G-P translate “ask your fee”, but no object is expressed, and a professional prostitute would normally specify her fee in advance. Melissa must be a semi-professional or a greedy amateur (hard to draw the line), who asks for presents (possibly monetary), but with no specific *quid pro quo*. That is why her request comes as an unpleasant surprise. Or is she giving out free kisses as a form of marketing?

4. The idea that an epigram should have ‘a sting in its tail’ is apparently much later (Schiller, I think). Otherwise, we might suspect Argentarius of indulging in the form of wit that matches form to meaning.

Source: Text and commentary in *The Greek Anthology: The Garland of Philip*, ed. A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page (Cambridge, 2 volumes, 1968).

## 50. The Worst Puns in the Greek Language?

Ἀντιγόνη, Σικελὴ πάρος ἦσθ' ἀ μοι· ὡς δ' ἐγενήθης  
Αἰτωλὴ, κἀγὼ Μῆδος, ἰδοῦ, γέγονα.

To me you were formerly a Sicilian, Antigone; but since you  
have become an Aetolian, look, I have become a Mede.

Gow and Page substitute English puns (possibly the worst in  
this language) for the original Greek ones:

For me in time past, Antigone, you were the girl from Sicily;  
since you became a Cheque, I have become a No-wagian.

This is Argentarius V G-P, epigram V, 102 in the Greek Anthology. The two puns in the second line are clear enough: since she has begun to ask (as if Αἰτωλή were related to αἰτεῖν) for money or gifts, he has become a “don’t give” (Μῆδος = μὴ δός). The point of ‘Sicilian’ in the first line is not yet satisfactorily explained. Some have argued that it alludes to Latin *sic* ‘yes’ and alludes to her previous willingness, but the quantity of the *i* differs. I wonder whether it refers to Sicilian cuisine, which was abundant and varied: had she previously offered a ‘smorgasbord’ of sexual delights?

Source: Text and commentary in *The Greek Anthology: The Garland of Philip*, ed. A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page (Cambridge, 2 volumes, 1968).

## 51. More Argentarius, This Time With No Puns

Στέρνα περὶ στέρνοις, μαστῶι δ' ἐπὶ μαστὸν ἐρείσας  
 χεῖλεά τε γλυκεροῖς χεῖλεσι συμπιέσας  
 Ἀντιγόνης καὶ χρῶτα λαβῶν πρὸς χρῶτα, τὰ λοιπὰ  
 σιγῶ, μάρτυς ἐφ' οἷς λύχνος ἐπεγράφετο.

Leaning chest to chest, breast to breast, pressing lips on sweet  
 lips, and taking Antigone's skin to my skin, I keep silent about  
 the other things, to which the lamp is registered as witness.

Not precisely a joke, this is Argentarius XIII G-P, epigram V, 128 in the Greek Anthology. A teasing poem, in the form of a *praeteritio*. We wonder just how far he will go in the naming of parts. Is there also a puzzle about what would come next. If he continues with specific names, he can hardly keep up the polyptoton, since the male and female parts have different names. Does he stop talking because his grammatical scheme no longer works? Or are we to imagine that the omitted climax (no pun intended) would have been something along the lines of *αἰδοίοις πρὸς αἰδοῖα*? In that case, the omission is tasteful.

4. Is the mention of the lamp particularly appropriate here? It illuminates them for each other without revealing anything to us.

Source: Text and commentary in *The Greek Anthology: The Garland of Philip*, ed. A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page (Cambridge, 2 volumes, 1968).

## 52. More Terrible Argentinian Puns

Ἀρχαίη σύνδειπνε, καπηλικὰ μέτρα φιλεῦσα,  
 εὐλάλε προῦγελως εὔστομε μακροφάρυξ,  
 αἰὲν ἐμῆς πενίης βραχυσύμβολε μύστι λάγυνε,  
 ἤλθες ὅμως ὑπ' ἐμὴν χειρὰ ποτ' χρόνιος.  
 αἶψ' ὄφελος καὶ ἄμικτος ἀνύμφευτός τε παρείης,  
 ἄφθορος ὡς κόρη πρὸς πόσιν ἐρχομένη.

Ancient comrade of the feast, lover of the shopman's measures, sweet-talking, soft-laughing, large-lipped, long-throated, ever sharing my poverty's secrets at small expense to yourself, late, flagon, but at last you have come under my hand. If only I had you pure and unmated, like a maid coming undefiled to her husband.

This is Argentinus XXIV G-P, epigram IX, 229 in the Greek Anthology. It is sympotic and pseudo-erotic. The addressee seems at first to be a woman, and is only revealed to be a wine-jug (*lágynos*) at the end of line 3. The last two epithets in line 2 suggest a woman of easy virtue. There are two horrible puns in the last couplet. As Gow and Page put it, ἀνύμφευτος in line 5 means “of the flagon, ‘not mingled with the Nymphs’ (i.e. with water); of the bride ‘οὐπω φιλότητι μιγεῖσα’ and unwedded”. Πόσις in line 6 means both ‘(the act of) drinking’ and ‘husband’. Gow and Page wonder “why he should have been separated from his flagon” and offer unconvincing suggestions. It seems to me that she has been going around to the other guests at the implied symposium before getting to him: he is saying that he would have preferred a virgin jug, not previously enjoyed by his friends.

Source: Text and translation taken from *The Greek Anthology: The Garland of Philip*, ed. A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page (Cambridge, 2 volumes, 1968).

### 53. A Two-Liner from Martial

Moechum Gellia non habet nisi unum.  
turpe est hoc magis: uxor est duorum.

Gellia has only one lover. What's shameful is that she has two husbands.

This is Martial VI, 90: very compact, with a nice twist. To set up for it, Martial slyly implies that a woman who keeps only one lover is a bit of a prude.

Meter: Phalaecian.

## 54. Diogenes on the Difference a Finger Makes

Τοὺς πλείστους ἔλεγε παρὰ δάκτυλον μαίνεσθαι· ἐὰν οὖν  
τις τὸν μέσον προτείνας πορεύηται, δόξει τωι μαίνεσθαι, ἐὰν  
δὲ τὸν λιχανόν, οὐκέτι.

Most people, he would say, are so nearly mad that a finger makes all the difference. For, if you go along with your middle finger stretched out, some one will think you mad, but, if it's the little finger, he will not think so.

Source: Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, VI, 35. Text and translation taken from the Loeb edition of R. D. Hicks (2 volumes, Cambridge, MA, 1929).

## 55. Martial on Rewraps

Omnia misisti mihi Saturnalibus, Vmber,  
munera, contulerant quae tibi quinque dies:  
bis senos triplices et dentiscalpia septem;  
his comes accessit spongea, mappa, calix,  
semodiusque fabae cum uimine Picenarum  
et Laletanae nigra lagona sapae;  
paruaque cum canis uenerunt cottana prunis  
et Libycae fici pondere testa grauis.  
Vix puto triginta nummorum tota fuisse  
munera, quae grandes octo tulere Syri.  
Quanto commodius nullo mihi ferre labore  
argenti potuit pondera quinque puer!

(translation and notes on next page)

Last Saturnalia, friend, I think  
You must have passed along  
To me each little gift you got  
Yourself; now am I wrong?  
Twelve tablets, seven toothpicks came;  
Sponge, napkin, cup not far  
Behind, a half a peck of beans,  
Some olives, a black jar  
Of cheap new wine, some withered prunes,  
Some figlets (not too big),  
And a monstrous heavy urn, filled up  
With the other kind of fig.  
I'd say these gifts, in all, were worth  
30 sesterces or less,  
But eight huge Syrian slaves were needed  
To carry the whole mess.

I have a better plan: next year  
When you're sending gifts to me  
You'll find one boy could tote five pounds  
Of silver easily!

A Saturnalia poem for Christmas Day. Source: Martial VII, 53, translated by Dorothea Wender. (I trust one poem comes under 'fair use'.)

## 56. Lucian Tells a Little Moron Joke

Ἔσβεσε τὸν λύχνον μῶρος, ψυλλῶν ὑπὸ πολλῶν  
δακνόμενος, λέξας· ‘Οὐκέτι με βλέπετε’.

Bitten by many fleas, a fool put out the lamp, saying “You can’t see me now”.

This is Greek Anthology XI, 432. ‘You’ is plural, and some might be inclined to translate ‘y’all’. No further explanation necessary.

## 57. Another Two-Liner from Martial

Heredem tibi me, Catulle, dicis.  
non credo nisi legero, Catulle.

You say that I am your heir, Catullus. I won't believe it  
unless I read it, Catullus.

This is Martial XII, 73. The ostensible meaning is 'put it in writing', but the clear implication is 'I want to read it in your will', which is an elegant way of saying 'drop dead'. Shackleton Bailey comments on the idiomatic use of the present *credo* where a future would be more logical. This Catullus is a mere dummy name, with no connection to the late Republican poet, though the latter was one of Martial's principal models.

Meter: Phalaecian.

## 58. Lucillius on a Five-Toed Sloth

Εἰς φυλακὴν βληθεὶς ποτε Μάρκος ὁ ἀργός, ἐκοντί,  
ὀκνῶν ἐξελθεῖν, ὡμολόγησε φόνον.

Once when he had been thrown into prison, slothful Marcus,  
being too lazy to come out, voluntarily confessed to a murder.

This is Greek Anthology XI, 276. Lucillius has been heard from before, in Jokes 18, 42, 44, and 45. He had obviously been jailed for a far lesser offence.

Meter: Elegiac couplet.

## 59. Martial on the Perfect Couple

Cum sitis similes paresque vita,  
uxor pessima, pessimus maritus,  
miror non bene convenire vobis.

Since the two of you are alike and equal in your way of life, a rotten wife and a rotten husband, I am surprised you don't suit one another.

This is Martial VIII, 35. Translation from Shackleton Bailey's Loeb. No explanation necessary. Meter: Phalaecian.

## 60. A Hermetic Pun — Argentarius Again

Παρθένον Ἀλκίππην ἐφίλουν μέγα, καί ποτε πείσας  
 αὐτὴν λαθριδίως εἶχον ἐπὶ κλισίῃ·  
 ἀμφοτέρων δὲ στέρονον ἐπάλλετο, μή τις ἐπέλθῃ,  
 μή τις ἴδῃ τὰ πόθων κρυπτὰ περισσότερων.  
 μητέρα δ' οὐκ ἔλαθεν κλίνῃ λάλος, ἀλλ' ἐσιδοῦσα  
 ἔξαπίνης Ἑρμῆς κοινός' ἔφη ἑδύγατερ'.

I was very much in love with the virgin Alkippe, and one day  
 I persuaded her and held her secretly on the bed. Both our  
 hearts were pounding, lest anyone should come by, lest  
 anyone see the secrets of our surpassing passion. But her  
 mother noticed the chattering bed and looked in suddenly and  
 said "Share your Hermes, daughter".

This is Argentarius XII G-P, epigram V, 127 in the Greek Anthology. Hermes is the god of (among other things) the lucky find (*hermaion*). 'Share your Hermes' is what you say when you spot a *hermaion* at the same time as someone else. The epigram implies the satirical stereotype of the lustful old woman, though that is only background. The fact that the narrator is apparently both naked and ithyphallic makes him a different sort of Hermes: in modern terms, a herm.

Source: Text and translation taken from *The Greek Anthology: The Garland of Philip*, ed. A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page (Cambridge, 2 volumes, 1968).

## 61. Ephemeral Ambition

Caninius . . . Rebilus, qui uno die . . . consul fuit, rostra cum ascendisset, pariter honorem iniit consulatus et eieravit; quod Cicero omni gaudens occasione urbanitatis increpuit, ‘λογοθεώρητος est Caninius consul’; et deinde: ‘hoc consecutus est Rebilus, ut quaereretur quibus consulibus consul fuerit’. dicere praeterea non destitit: ‘vigilantem habemus consulem Caninium, qui in consulatu suo somnum non vidit’.

Caninius Rebilus . . . was consul for only a single day and mounted the rostrum to assume the office of the consulate and at the same time to relinquish it. Cicero therefore, who welcomed every chance to make a humorous remark, referred to him slightly as a “notional consul” and later said of him: “He has done this much: he has obliged us to ask in whose consulship he was consul”, adding, “We have a wide-awake consul in Caninius, for while in office he never slept a wink”.

A quotation for New Year’s Eve. I have deleted some irrelevant context. Roman consuls served from January 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>. When a consul resigned or died in office, a substitute was appointed to fill out his term. Q. Fabius Maximus died suddenly on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 45 B.C., and Julius Caesar appointed Gaius Caninius Rebilus to fill the few hours of his unexpired term. Caninius was a loyal Caesarian: he has a bit part in the *Gallic War*. Today we would probably say “virtual” rather than “notional”. In the first line, *uno die* is ‘ablative of time within which’: if Macrobius had written *unum diem*, he would have implied that Caninius was consul for an entire day, which would have been a gross exaggeration. Source: Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, II, 3, 6. Translation adapted from Percival Vaughan Davies, *Macrobius: The Saturnalia*, New York and London, 1969.