

## 93. A Demented Pun

Ἡράσθην Δημοῦς Παφίης γένος· οὐ μέγα θαῦμα·  
καὶ Σαμίης Δημοῦς δεύτερον· οὐχὶ μέγα·  
καὶ πάλιν Ὑσιακῆς Δημοῦς τρίτον· οὐκέτι ταῦτα  
παίγνια· καὶ Δημοῦς τέτρατον Ἀργολίδος.  
αὐταί που Μοῖραί με κατωνόμοσαν Φιλόδημον,  
ὡς αἰεὶ Δημοῦς θερμὸς ἔχοι με πόθος.

I fell in love with Demo from Paphos; no surprise. And, second, with Demo from Samos; no big deal.

And again, and third, with Demo from Hysiai — this is no longer a joke — and fourth with Demo from Argos.

It must have been the Moirai themselves who named me Philo-demos, so that burning passion for a Demo would always take hold of me.

This is number 10 in *The Epigrams of Philodemus*, edited by David Sider (Oxford, 1997), number 6 in Gow and Page, *The Garland of Philip*, and number 5.115 in the Greek Anthology. If Marcus Argentarius had never been born, it would have some claim to being the worst pun in the collection. I quote Sider's text and translation. The average quality is very high, though not many will appear here, since Philodemus' wit is not usually packaged into jokes.

## 94. A Philosophical Joke

Crates, . . . cum vidisset adulescentulum secreto ambulans, interrogavit quid illic solus faceret. 'Mecum' inquit 'loquor.' Cui Crates 'cave' inquit 'rogo et diligenter adtende: cum homine malo loqueris.'

Crates, . . . when he had seen a young man walking by himself, asked him what he was doing alone in that place. "Talking to myself." To which Crates said, "Watch out, be very careful: you're in bad company."

This is from the younger Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*, 10.1, omitting some irrelevancies. Crates was a philosopher. The last bit is literally "you're talking with a bad person".

## 95. Archaic Humor

ἑπτὰ γὰρ νεκρῶν πεσόντων, οὓς ἐμάρψαμεν ποσίν,  
χείλιοι φονῆές εἰμεν, . . .

For seven of the enemy we overtook and slew,  
a thousand of us claim the kill . . . .

This is Archilochus 101, edited and translated by M. L. West in *Iambi et Elegi Graeci I* (Oxford, 1977) and *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Oxford World Classics), respectively. It is a fragment, in trochaic meter, preserved only because Plutarch quoted it in his *Life of Galba* (27.0).

## 96. An Obvious Retort

‘Tristis Athenagoras non misit munera nobis  
quae medio brumae mittere mense solet.’  
An sit Athenagoras tristis, Faustine, videbo;  
me certe tristem fecit Athenagoras.

“Athenagoras is sad and has not sent us the presents which he normally sends in the middle of midwinter’s month.” Whether Athenagoras is sad I’ll see later, Faustinus. Athenagoras has certainly saddened me.

Martial 8.41, very literally translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey in the new Loeb. The unsent gifts are for Saturnalia. I suppose Athenagoras is too depressed to celebrate. I don’t know if this can be gotten out of the Latin, or emended into the Latin, but I would have preferred something beginning “Athenagoras regrets that he is unable to send . . .”

## 97. A Way with Words

τίς ὀμφαλητόμος σε τὸν διοπλῆγα  
ἔψησε κάπέλουσεν ἀσκαρίζοντα;

What birthcord-snipper wiped and cleaned you up,  
you blighted creature, as you squirmed and mewled?

Not really a joke, but some choice invective: this is Hipponax 19, again edited and translated by M. L. West. It only survives because a grammarian quoted it for the rare verb translated “squirmed and mewled”. The meter is scazons, ‘limping iambs’, a Hipponactean specialty.

## 98. More Hipponax

Ἑρμῆ, φίλ' Ἑρμῆ, Μαιαδεῦ, Κυλλήνιε,  
ἐπέυχομαί τοι, κάρτα γὰρ κακῶς ῥιγῶ  
καὶ βαμβαλύζω . . .  
δὸς χλαῖναν Ἴππώνακτι καὶ κυπασσίσκον  
καὶ σαμβαλίσκα κάσκερίσκα καὶ χρυσοῦ  
στατῆρας ἑξήκοντα τούτερου τοίχου.

Hermes, dear Hermes, Maia's son, Cyllenian,  
hear thou my prayer, for I am bloody frozen,  
my teeth are chattering . . .  
Grant Hipponax a cloak and a nice tunic  
and some nice sandals and nice fur boots,  
and sixty gold sovereigns to balance me up . . .

Hipponax 32, more scazons, again edited and translated by M. L. West. The fur boots of line 5 were apparently furry on the outside, like some modern bedroom slippers. I don't know if the idea is original, but I've always thought these would make excellent burglar shoes, being very quiet, like modern "sneakers", and leaving indistinct footprints, like the brushwood bundles baby Hermes wears himself in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes. That would be a hint that Hipponax is willing to help Hermes out in acquiring the sixty gold coins, if Hermes will first help him find the proper equipment.

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## 99. Martial on Love and Marriage

Nubere Paula cupit nobis, ego ducere Paulam  
nolo: anus est. Vellem, si magis esset anus.

Paula wants to marry me, I'm unwilling to marry Paula: she's old. I'd be willing, if she were older.

Martial 10.8. Do I have to explain this one?

## 100. The Sincerest Form of Flattery

Lucilius:

Εἴη σοι κατὰ γῆς κούφη κόνις, οἰκτρὲ Νέαρχε,  
ὄφρα σε ῥηιδίως ἐξερύσωσι κύνες.

Martial:

Sit tibi terra levis mollique tegaris harena,  
ne tua non possint eruere ossa canes.

Lucilius:

May the dust lie lightly on you under the earth, wretched Nearchos, so that the dogs may more easily dig you out.

Martial:

May the earth be light upon you, and may you be covered by soft sand, lest the dogs be unable to dig you out.

Martial's two lines end a twelve-line epigram (9.29), and are most likely imitated from Lucilius' single couplet (*Greek Anthology* 9.226). (The two were near contemporaries.) The wish in the first line of each is standard in sincere epitaphs, and both poets save the pointiest part of the point for the last word, "dogs". Lucilius' transition is particularly neat: οἰκτρός, "wretched", can mean genuinely pitiable, or contemptibly so, and the meaning shifts from one to the other to fit the preceding and following context. There is a similar pun in tomorrow's joke, from a prose author so far unquoted here.



## 101. Speaking Truth to Power

In Sicily Dionysius, the tyrant of Syracuse, . . . was enjoying peace and leisure. He began writing poetry with great enthusiasm, sending for the famous poets, spending his time with them and showering honours on them, and using them as supervisors and reviewers of his poetry. His generosity led to flattery on the part of these grateful critics, and removed from reality by it he bragged more of his poetry than of his military successes. One of the poets at his court was Philoxenus, the composer of dithyrambs, who had a high reputation for his own style of composition, and at the drinking-party when the tyrant's wretched poems were read he was asked his opinion of them; he gave a rather frank reply, and the tyrant took offence, faulted him for slandering him out of envy, and told his attendants to take him off at once to the quarries. Next day his friends begged him to pardon Philoxenus, so he made it up to him and invited the same company to the drinking party. As the drinking progressed, Dionysius again began to brag of his poetry and cited some lines which he regarded as particularly successful; but when he asked Philoxenus what he thought of them, his only response was to summon the attendants and tell them to take him off to the quarries. At the time Dionysius smiled at the wittiness of the reply and put up with his frankness: laughter took the edge off fault-finding; but soon after when the friends of each party asked Dionysius to excuse his untimely frankness, Philoxenus made the strange offer that his answer would preserve both the truth and Dionysius' reputation; and he kept his promise, because *when the tyrant cited some lines which described lamentable events and asked what he thought of him, Philoxenus said, 'Tragic', using the ambiguity to preserve truth together with the tyrant's reputation*: Dionysius took 'tragic' to mean 'lamentable and full of pathos', and knowing that good poets excelled in such writing accepted it as praise from Philoxenus; but the rest of the company picked up the true meaning and saw that the term 'tragic' had been used only to brand a failure.

(Comments and translation of the emphasized words are on the next page.)

τοῦ γὰρ τυράννου προενεγκαμένου τινὰς στίχας ἔχον-  
τας ἔλεεινὰ πάθη, καὶ ἐρωτήσαντος ‘ποῖά τινα φαί-  
νεται τὰ ποιήματα;’ εἶπεν ‘οἰκτρά,’ διὰ τῆς ἀμφι-  
βολίας ἀμφότερα τηρήσας.

Translatable puns are rare. This one is recounted by Diodorus Siculus in his *World History* (15.6). I quote it from Volume 5 of the Loeb edition of *Greek Lyric*, translated by D. A. Campbell (pages 140-43), where it is a testimonium for the life and art of the dithyrambist Philoxenus of Cythera, born 435/434 B.C. Campbell notes that “Take me off to the quarries” became something of a proverb, quoted four times in three different authors. This is the same Dionysius who sold Plato into slavery.

‘Tragic’ is perhaps not the best translation of Philoxenus’ ambiguous adjective, though Dionysius was apparently writing tragedies. The Greek word (οἰκτρά) is more general: ‘pitiful’ or ‘pathetic’. The pun would work just as well today: “Your tragedy / elegy is absolutely *pitiful*, totally *pathetic*, I couldn’t stop crying!” (What should you say if someone you do not wish to offend writes a lame attempt at comedy or satire and asks you to judge it? “Truly ludicrous! I couldn’t stop laughing!”)

## 102. A Horatian Pun?

Cum tot sustineas et tanta negotia solus,  
 res Italas armis tuteris, moribus ornes,  
 legibus emendes, in publica commoda peccem,  
 si longo sermone morer tua tempora, Caesar.

Seeing that you alone carry the weight of so many great charges, guarding our Italian state with arms, gracing her with morals, and reforming her with laws, I should sin against the public weal if with long talk, Caesar, I were to delay your busy hours.

These are the first four lines of the *Epistle to Augustus* (II.1), with H. R. Fairclough's archaic Loeb translation. In his massive commentary, C. O. Brink notes that *morer tua tempora* (4) is a "*callida iunctura*, making two ordinary words, *morari* and *tempus*, by juxtaposition into something unprosaic and memorable". He also quotes *Ep.* 1.13.17-18 for a more usual use of *morari* in a similar context: *carmina quae possint oculos auresque morari / Caesaris*, "verses that may win a hold on the eyes and ears of Caesar". What Brink does not note is that *morari*, "detain, delay, win a hold on", could just as easily have a body part as the direct object in our passage: not just "detain your *times*" (Fairclough's "delay your busy hours"), but "detain your *forehead*": *tempora* has both meanings. If that's what Horace intended, it's a terrible pun, but no worse than the one around which *Satire* 1.7 is constructed.

### 103. Lucillius on an Ugly Man

Ῥύγχος ἔχων τοιοῦτον, Ὀλυμπικέ, μήτ' ἐπὶ κρήνην  
ἔλθης, μήτ' ἐνόρα πρὸς τι διαυγές ὕδωρ.  
καὶ σὺ γάρ, ὡς Νάρκισσος, ἰδὼν τὸ πρόσωπον ἐναργές,  
τεθνήξῃ, μισῶν σαυτὸν ἕως θανάτου.

Having such a mug, Olympicus, go not to a fountain nor look into any transparent water, for you, like Narcissus, seeing your face clearly, will die, hating yourself to the death.

Of course, Narcissus died by loving, not hating, himself to death. This is Greek Anthology 11.76, with Paton's Loeb translation. The previous epigram, also by Lucillius, makes it clear that Olympicus is an unsuccessful prizefighter. His name might have suggested that in any case.

## 104. Palladas Again

Γραμματικοῦ θυγάτηρ ἔτεκεν φιλότητι μιγεῖσα  
παιδίον ἀρσενικόν, θηλυκόν, οὐδέτερον.

The daughter of a grammarian, having mingled in love, bore a child masculine, feminine, and neuter.

Greek Anthology 9.489. “Mingled in love” is a Homeric cliché. Is it oversubtle to suppose that the ambiguity of the child points to an abundance of possible fathers? Or is the point that grammarians are supposed to be unmanly, and able to pass the trait on to later generations?