There’s More than One Kind of Filthy Lefty: Catullus 12.1-3

I wonder if there is more to the opening of this famous poem than scholars say:

Marrucine Asini, manu sinistra
non belle uteris: in ioco atque vino
tollis lintea neglegentiorum.
hoc salsum esse putas? fugit te, inepte:
quamvis sordida res et invenusta est.
non credis mihi? crede Pollioni
fratri, qui tua furta vel talento
mutari velit: . . . .

Ancient Romans used their left hands for more than one function. When is the reader of this poem supposed to realize that Asinius Marrucinus is using his for theft? We surely do not expect that he is urinating or defecating at the table, but that still leaves one more possibility, perhaps two. In the first two lines it looks as if he may be using his left hand like Ponticus in Martial 9.41 (paelice laevā . . . amica manus, 1-2), Martial himself in 11.73 (sinistra, 4), or Priapus in Priapea 33 (ne tentigine rumpar, / falce mihi posita fiet amica manus, 5-6). That would be thoroughly disgusting, and selfish. More generously, though just as disgustingly, he may be using his friendly hand to help out his fellow guests, like the person advised in Ovid, Ars Amatoria 2.706 (nec manus in lecto laeva iacebit iners). All these parallels are later than Horace, but he must have known Lucilius 306, at laeva lacrimas muttoni absterget amica, where amica may be a nominative noun, or an ablative adjective, or a pun combining the two (the hexameter meter shows that laevā is ablative).

Does the third line disabuse us (if you’ll forgive the pun) and show that Asinus’ furtive fumblings enact only good clean theft? Not necessarily. If a modern writer were to write of someone lifting napkins from other diners’ laps at dinner, it would certainly sound obscene. Of course, ancient convictores reclined on couches, so it’s not clear whether they had anything resembling a lap while dining and drinking. Even if they did, I do not know whether their napkins would have been anywhere near their laps. So perhaps I am misled by modern non-parallels into thinking that the double entendre might continue past line 2. But it certainly works in the first two lines. Can anyone enlighten me on the deployment of napkins at ancient convivia?