

### 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 linthea neglegentiorum.  
 hoc salsum esse putas? fugit te, inepte:  
 quamvis sordida res et invenusta est.                   5  
 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 fumbings 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*?