

One, Two, Three, . . . Where's the Fourth? Martial 4.49

In the second and third couplets of 4.49, Martial gives four mythological exempla for the unseriousness of the higher genres of verse, epic and tragedy. I quote the entire poem for context:¹

Nescit, crede mihi, quid sint epigrammata, Flacce,
 qui tantum lusus illa iocosque vocat.
 ille magis ludit qui scribit prandia saevi
 Tereos aut cenam, crude Thyesta, tuam,
 aut puero liquidas aptantem Daedalon alas, 5
 pascentem Siculas aut Polyphemon ovis.
 a nostris procul est omnis vesica libellis,
 Musa nec insano syrmate nostra tumet.
 ‘illa tamen laudant omnes, mirantur, adorant.’
 confiteor: laudant illa, sed ista legunt. 10

1 nescit Tγ : nescis β | 2 illa βγ : ista T vocat Tγ : putas β | 4 Thyesta ζ : -te *codd.*

It is surely no coincidence that all four of the mythological names have Greek endings, and interesting that the only one not guaranteed by the meter has been corrupted to an impos-sible form in all the manuscripts. I wonder how many Greek endings in other poems have been corrupted beyond retrieval because the corresponding Roman forms scan equally well.

Turning now to the main point of this note, in her very full commentary on Martial IV (Leiden 2006), Moreno Soldevila notes that the first three exempla all contain word-choices that tend towards the “ridiculisatio of myth-oriented epic and tragedy” (note on 3 *prandia*). Specifically,

1. In line 3, *prandia* is “non-poetic . . . absent from major genres, but present in comedy”. ‘Luncheon’ or even ‘brunch’ might be a suitably comical English equivalent.

2. Similarly, *cena* in 4 is another non-poetic term, and *crudus*, though some have taken it to mean ‘savage, cruel’, is more likely to mean “suffering from indigestion”, another “grotesque reading”. I would only add that Seneca’s tragic Thyestes, though he

¹ Text and apparatus are from Shackleton Bailey’s Teubner edition (1990). I am very tempted by T’s *ista* in 2, which seems to fit the last line better than βγ’s *illa*.

does not use the word *crudus*, gives a vivid and way too explicit description of his own severe indigestion (*Th.* 1041-42):

volvuntur intus viscera, et clausum nefas
sine exitu luctatur et quaerit fugam.

He almost seems to be trying to diminish and grotesculate his genre himself.

3. In line 5, the diminishing word is *liquidus*. This must refer primarily to the melted wax used to attach the wings as they were put on: the fact that it will be resoftened by the sun when they come off is almost too clearly anticipated, as is Icarus' watery destination (so Post). Given that *liquidus* also means 'clear', I wonder if there is a suggestion that the wings are transparent, like those of a bee, a fly, or a dragonfly, where most modern depictions of Daedalus and Icarus, and of more naturally winged ancients like Psyche's Cupid, give them the wings of a bird or a butterfly.² Though unprovable, that would add another touch of the bizarre.

After the mockery in the first three myths, it seems to me that another such joke is badly needed in the fourth (line 6), where the description of Polyphemus pasturing his Sicilian sheep is unexceptionably and boringly epic as transmitted. This is the worst possible place to turn serious. There may be more than one way to introduce such a joke, but here is one possibility with good Martialic parallels:

pascentem **similes** aut Polyphemon ovis.

Martial uses a similar (heh) joke in 6.77.8 to describe a black elephant and its mahout:

quaeque vehit **similem** belua nigra Libyn

The same joke, with similar wording, describes a white tower-dovecote and its doves in 12.31.6:

quaeque gerit **similes** candida turris aves.

A more elliptical version of the joke is probable in 7.87.4, where Cronius (in the β manuscripts) or perhaps Chronius (in the γ manuscripts – either name would imply an old man) keeps a pet ape as ugly as himself:

si Cronius **similem** cercopithecon amat.

² A point still to be researched: ancient visual depictions of natural and artificial humanoid wings.

These parallels seem to me to make *similes* quite attractive in 4.49.3. Calling Polyphemos' sheep in 4.49.6 'similar' (sc. to him) would imply that he is, like the sheep who live with him in his cave – like all sheep, in fact – unsophisticated, rather stupid, and very very hairy. Of course, there may be other, better ways to destroy the epicity of line 6. I am open to suggestion.