

## What Kind of Rope Makes the Best Gift? Martial 4.70.1

One of Martial's best quatrains is 4.70. I do not know why Shackleton Bailey calls the addressee Marullinus in his Teubner (1990) and Loeb (1993) texts, Marcellinus in the Loeb translation, with no apparatus criticus for either. Here is his Loeb version:

Nihil Ammiano praeter aridam restem  
moriens reliquit ultimis pater ceris.  
fieri putaret posse quis, Marulline,  
ut Ammianus mortuum patrem nollet?

Ammianus' father on his deathbed left him nothing in his last will but a dry rope. Who would have thought, Marcellinus, that Ammianus could be sorry his father died?

It seems to me that this poem, like many other epigrams of Martial, has two interpretations, one nastier than the other. I suspect others have read it the same two ways I do, but these are not spelled out in the latest commentary on Book IV (Moreno Soldevila, Leiden, 2006), so I will spell them out here, with no claim to originality for either:

1. The nicer interpretation: Ammianus wishes his father were still alive, so he could try to convince him to change his will and undisinherit him.
2. The nastier interpretation: Ammianus wishes his father were still alive, so he could kill the selfish bastard for disinheriting his own son. Of course, this is entirely illogical, since he can hardly kill someone for doing something that could not be undone, when it was only irrevocable after he was safely dead and unkillable, but the very illogicality seems amusing to me.<sup>1</sup>

Whether Ammianus knew he had been disinherited before his father died, and whether he deserved it, are interesting questions on which I have nothing interesting to say. See Moreno Soldevila for further discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> I enjoy this reading much as I enjoy my reading of Juvenal 8.211-14, where Nero deserved to be executed by the traditional punishment of parricides: to be cast into the Tiber, sewn up in a leather sack with a dog, a snake, a cock, and a monkey. When the satirist writes that Nero deserved 'more than one ape, more than one snake, and more than one sack' (*cuius supplicio non debuit una parari / simia nec serpens unus nec culleus unus*, 213-14), the last item amusingly (or perhaps surrealistically) cancels the horror of the punishment, since a Nero chopped into two or more pieces beforehand would suffer nothing from the four other beasts.

So much for the interpretation. As for the text, I suspect that Martial wrote *horridam*, not *aridam*, in line 1. A rough, coarse-knit rope would be a very suitable gift here: a little bit cheaper, and quite a bit less comfortable around the neck. Moreno Soldevila takes it that *aridam*, besides meaning ‘dry’ (which doesn’t seem to add much: most ropes are dry when ready to use), “defines the legacy as worthless”, with useful parallels. Interestingly, two of them, from Plautus and Terence, wordplayfully pair forms of *aridus* with forms of *avidus*, while the last two, both from Cicero, pair *aridus* with *horridus*:<sup>2</sup> *vitam omnium semper horridam atque aridam* (*Pro Quinctio*, 93); *in victu arido, in hac horrida inculta-que vita* (*Pro Roscio Amerino*, 75). It looks like the transmitted text and my conjecture were somewhat interchangeable in contexts pertinent to our poem. Mediaeval scribes’ habit of dropping or adding Hs and doubling or undoubling consonants more or less at random would have made *aridam* for *horridam* a very easy error, and there would have been no temptation to change it back, since *aridam* is not bad in itself, just (in my fallible judgment) inferior to *horridam*.

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<sup>2</sup> Something I did not know when I devised my conjecture, though I had previously suggested the same change in Juvenal 14.61, and that won approval from at least one distinguished Juvenalian.