

A Second *Double Entendre* in Persius 4.5

Socrates to Alcibiades (4.4-5 – text and apparatus from Clausen’s OCT):

scilicet ingenium et rerum prudentia uelox
ante pilos uenit, dicenda tacendaue calles.

5 -ve PMR : -que αVXΦS

Though Nebrissensis got it right in 1503,¹ and Harvey notes that “*pilos* metonymically for *barbam* seems to be unparalleled”, most commentators and translators in the last two centuries have taken *pilos* in 5 to mean ‘beard’ or (Braund) ‘whiskers’. Kißel however rightly insists that the word covers all varieties of body hair: though it takes up the mention of Socrates’ beard in line 1 and refers in part to facial hair as a sign of maturity and wisdom, it also anticipates the description of the ‘aging playboy’ (“alternde Lebemann”) sunbathing naked (and bearded) in 33-41 with his ‘withered bulbs’ and ‘shaved weevil’ on display.²

So much for *pilos*. It seems to me that another *double entendre* has been missed in the second half of line 5, and that understanding it will make the choice between the variants *-que* and *-ve* easy. The primary meaning is clear: “You are an expert in what must and must not be said” (Braund). Kißel notes the comical anticlimax in the stylistic contrast between the high-flown, hyperbolic, polar expression *dicenda tacendaue* and the vulgar colloquial verb *calles*.

So far, so good, but I think there is more to it than that. Given the physicality of *calles*, derived, as Kißel notes, from *callum* (‘callus’) and implying not just knowledge but experience, Persius’ Socrates is slyly implying that Alcibiades, though very young, is already sexually experienced in things that may be mentioned (though not described) in respectable circles (*dicenda*) and other things that are so shameful and degrading that

¹ “VENIT ANTE PILOS, id est, ante quam barba, pecten et ala [v.l. alae] pubescant”. (He must be thinking of the Juvenalian meaning of *pecten* in 6.368-70: *illa voluptas / summa tamen, quom iam calida matura iuuenta / inguina traduntur medicis, iam pectine nigro*.)

² *bulbos* is Richter’s compelling emendation of the MSS’ *vulvas* in 36. *curculio* for *gurgulio* in 38 is my own conjecture, and I will have more to say about the weevil in a later note. (A long overdue note: it was published in the apparatus of Braund’s Loeb in 2004 and the idea is at least twice as old as that.)

they may not even be mentioned, much less described, in polite company, particularly in the first person (*tacenda*). We might say that Alcibiades, though so young, is already ‘calloused’ in all the wrong places. The second, sexual meaning of *Rem populi tractas* (1) would definitely fall under the category of *tacenda*. The obscene pun in *dicenda* and *tacenda* requires *-que* rather than *-ve* for the conjunction: young as he is, Alcibiades is experienced in sexual acts that fall into both classes, not just one or the other. Though Clausen (among others) prints *-ve*, Kibel argues for *-que* on other grounds. I think the pun settles the matter.