

An Abysmal Pun: Marcus Argentarius VI G-P (A.P. 5.104)

R. G. M. Nisbet has remarked that the epigrams of Marcus Argentarius, “a truly Roman punster”, show “an ingenious crudity worthy of Martial himself”.¹ I have argued elsewhere that some of his crudities are so very ingeniously (and punningly) expressed that they have gone unnoticed or have been only partly understood.² A further instance of this phenomenon occurs in epigram VI G-P (A.P. 5.104). For reasons which will become clear below, it will be best to begin from Gow and Page’s text and translation:³

Αἶρε τὰ δίκτυα ταῦτα, κακόσχολε, μηδ’ ἐπίτηδες
 ἰσχίον ἐρχομένη σύστρεφε, Λυσιδίκη·
 εὔ σε περισφίγγει λεπτός στολιδώμασι πέπλος,
 πάντα δέ σου βλέπεται καὶ οὐ βλέπεται.
 εἰ τόδε σοι χαρίεν καταφαίνεται, αὐτὸς ὁμοίως
 ὀρθὸν ἔχων βυσσῶ τοῦτο περισκεπάσω.

3 εὔ Paton : οὐ P | λεπτός στολιδώμασι Reiske : λεπτοστολιδώμασι P

“Take off those nets, procrastinator, stop twisting your hips so purposefully as you walk, Lysidicê. How close your thin gown binds you in its folds, — all of you is seen, yet unseen, naked. So you think this is a delightful game? I too have something to be covered straight in gauze.”

Opinions differ as to the quality of Argentarius’ wit in this poem, as in others: G-P call it “a good-humoured and well-phrased epigram”, M. Del Re “un epigramma di un’indecenza ripugnante”.⁴ I hope to show that the epigram is even more indecent than Del Re realizes: whether that makes it more repulsive or more attractive is a matter of taste.

Though every bit as perspicuous as Lysidike’s clothing, G-P’s translation does not quite match the text that they print on the facing page. In the last line, where all other editors consulted

¹ R. G. M. Nisbet, *Felicitas at Surrentum* (Statius, *Silvae* 2.2), JRS 68 (1978) 1-11, reprinted in *Collected Papers on Latin Literature*, Oxford 1995, 29-46: the quoted words are taken from pages 7-8 (= 39). Text and translation are from A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page (= ‘G-P’), *The Greek Anthology. The Garland of Philip*, 2 vols., Cambridge, 1968.

² M. Hendry, *A Hermetic Pun in Marcus Argentarius XII G-P* (A.P. 5.127), *Hermes* 119 (1991) 497, and *Frigidus Lusius: Marcus Argentarius XXXIV Gow-Page* (*Anth. Pal.* 11.320), *GRBS* 32 (1991) 197-201.

³ I have included only the more interesting variants. Paton’s εὔ for οὐ in line 3 seems necessary, though the argument of this paper is not affected in any way if I am wrong.

⁴ R. Del Re, *Marco Argentario*, *Maia* Anno 7 (1955) 184-215, at 191. As S. G. P. Small (*Marcus Argentarius: A Poet of the Greek Anthology*, *YCIS* 12 [1951] 67-145) notes, τοῦτο (6) is probably deictic: the narrator points to his own organ. So also Jacobs: ‘τοῦτο, τὸ πῶς sc. Pronomina enim saepe ad res obscoenas significandas valent’.

(Jacobs, Dübner, Stadtmüller, Paton, Waltz, and Beckby) print βύσσω, G-P print βυσσῶ, which is quite another word. In the words of L.S.J.,⁹ βύσσοϛ (feminine) means “flax, and the linen made from it”, while βυσσός (masculine) means “depth of the sea”: they are as different as βίος and βίος, ‘life’ and ‘bow’. Since their commentary gives no hint that G-P were aware of the discrepancy between their text and their translation, it looks as if βυσσῶ must be dismissed as a trivial typographical error, of no interest except to the small-minded.

I suggest that there is more to it than that, and that Gow and Page (or their typesetters) have stumbled upon something both true and important, in fact the key to the epigram. However βύσσω is to be accented — more on this point below — it surely conceals an obscene pun. It is entirely appropriate that the one word should mean ‘pit’ or ‘bottom’ as well as ‘gauze’ here: the speaker has something — something ‘straight’ — to be enclosed in her ‘pit’. Of course, βυσσός does not mean ‘bodily orifice’ or even ‘hole, pit’ generally, but ‘depth of the sea, bottom of the sea’. On the other hand, βύσσοϛ usually means ‘linen’ generally, with no implication that the cloth is unusually thin or loose-woven, as it obviously must be in this poem. It seems to me that Argentarius strains the meanings of both words for the sake of his climactic pun, stretching βύσσοϛ from ‘linen’ to ‘gauze’ and βυσσός from ‘depth of the sea’ to ‘pit, hole’ to ‘sexual orifice’ plus ‘pitfall’. Lysidike first pursues the speaker with nets and then attempts to lure him into her pitfall trap.⁵

A second logical inconcinnity complicates the interpretation of this epigram. It is not at all clear what it would mean for the speaker to wrap his organ in gauze or linen: the nonpunning sense of βύσσω is more problematical than the editors who print it or (in the case of G-P) translate it seem to realize. I see three possible lines of argument here. My first thought was that the speaker’s organ will be ‘wrapped in gauze’ in so far as it is wrapped in Lysidike while she is wrapped in gauze. However, this is rather strained, and we might expect her to remove what little clothing she is wearing before the sexual act.⁶ The anonymous referee has suggested a second possibility, that βύσσω refers to a condom. It is certainly difficult to think of any other thin cloth-

⁵ I mean ‘pitfall’ in the etymological sense of a trap made by digging a pit and covering it with leaves or dirt, so that the unwary animal will fall in. Since the method of hunting is obsolete, the word is only used metaphorically in contemporary English. Small notes that Argentarius uses hunting metaphors in *A.P.* 5.16.6 (coins as silver hunting dogs) and *A.P.* 7.403.3 (a pimp as ὁ θηρεύων ἀπαλόφρονας).

⁶ On the other hand, there is a close parallel in the American vulgarity ‘I’ve been in her pants’, meaning ‘I’ve had sex with her’. The pants are generally elsewhere at the critical time.

like covering which might enclose the speaker's (erect) organ, as there is no reason to suppose that he is wearing see-through clothing himself. Linen may seem an unlikely material for a condom, gauze even more so, since the slightest degree of porosity would subvert the purpose of the device. However, the earliest unambiguous mention of the condom, in G. Fallopius' *De Morbo Gallico* (1564), specifies linen (*linteolum ad mensuram glandis praeparatum*) as an appropriate material.⁷ In any case, a second objection to this line of argument seems fatal: there is virtually no evidence for the use of condoms by the ancients.⁸ That leaves us with the third possibility, which I prefer, that Argentarius is so eager to inflict his terrible pun on the helpless reader that he does not mind making the literal or 'foreground' meaning slightly absurd: the illogicality is excused by the requirements of the pun. Of course, the inappropriateness of the literal sense of βύσσω ('gauze') would also help to signal the presence of the second, punning, sense ('pit, hole').

This brings us to the question of the text to be printed. Should we read βύσσω or βυσσῶ, and in either case, how is the reader to know that both are meant?⁹ In one sense, that is our problem, not the poet's. Writing in the first century B.C.E., Argentarius presumably wrote something like ΒΥCCΩΙ. However, we are still left with the problem of determining how he pronounced it, how he expected his readers to pronounce it, and how we may best use our typographical resources to guide the modern reader. To make things as clear as possible, I suppose a doubly-accentuated βύσσῶ would be the best text. This is contrary to the rules of Greek accentuation, but it would make the word start out as if it meant 'gauze' and end up as 'hole', thus nicely illustrating the

⁷ N. E. Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (New York 1936), affirms Fallopius' priority (188) and gives the Latin text of the beginning of chapter 89 (*De praeservatione à carie Gallica*) in a plate on the following page.

⁸ For instance, J. M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA 1992), is quite emphatic (5): "There is little if any evidence for usage of a condom or sheath during antiquity to prevent conception." Himes is more positive (187-88), and considers it "quite possible" (188) that the ancients used condoms, either for contraception or for protection against venereal infection, but can offer in evidence only the bizarre story in Antoninus Liberalis 41, in which Minos ejaculates snakes, spiders, and scorpions, killing his sexual partners, until Procris prescribes a sort of 'female condom', made of a goat bladder, for the women. Even if we add Argentarius VI to the discussion — and students of ancient contraceptives are welcome to do so — these two passages are not much to set against the complete silence of those who might have been expected to mention condoms. As D. P. Fowler puts it (in an E-mail communication), "[m]ore important surely is the fact that writers like Soranus never mention the idea": given the enormous number of recipes for herbal contraceptives mentioned by Soranus and others (see Riddle, *passim*), their silence on the subject of condoms is eloquent.

⁹ There is a similar problem in Heraclitus, *Fr.* 48 D.K., τῶ οὖν τόξῳ ὄνομα βίος, ἔργον δὲ θάνατος. The philosopher presumably wrote something like BIOC, meaning both βίος and βιός. If modern editors make the word 'life' rather than 'bow', that is their interpretation of how it should be heard, not how it was written.

shift in the reader's mind from the primary to the secondary meaning. Like other puns, βύσσῳ has a 'peek-a-boo' or 'now you see it, now you don't' effect, very much like Lysidike's clothing and what it barely (pun intended) conceals. First we see the 'gauze' and only then, when it is too late to turn back, do we see the 'pit', like unwary beasts falling into a pitfall trap.¹⁰

¹⁰ I wish to thank the anonymous referee for several suggested improvements, as well as for asking the question about ancient condoms, also Don Fowler (note 8 above) and numerous other members of the Internet Classics list for helping to answer that question, in so far as it can be answered. I knew virtually nothing about ancient contraceptives before I consulted them.