1) The passage is printed as in the Oxford Classical Text, ed. H. Stuart Jones and J.E. Powell (Oxford 1942).—Hereafter all references are to Thucydides, unless otherwise indicated.

2) See, for example, the following commentaries: I. Bekker (Oxford 1821), E.F. Poppo (Leipzig 1821-40), T. Arnold, 3rd ed. (Oxford 1847), J. Steup, Dritter Band, 4th ed. (Berlin 1963).—A.W. Gomme’s note on this passage (see A Historical Commentary on Thucydides (Oxford 1945-)) mentions ὀρμή but gives no indication as to how he translates the word nor any explanation of the use of τε in τὴν τε ἄλλην. For a different translation of ὀρμή (‘movement’) and of the whole passage see P.J. Rhodes, Thucydides: History III (Warming 1994).


4) See his note ad loc. and also those in the commentaries of Bekker, Poppo and Steup.—The debate about whether the verb should be singular or plural is not relevant to my argument.

5) Archidamus tells his audience: ‘All of Greece is aroused by this enterprise and focuses its attention on it’.

6) Like others (cf. 3.32.3) the Athenians were clearly taken aback by the boldness of the Peloponnesians in sailing to Ionia.—Doubtless also they were disturbed by the size of the fleet that had been sent (forty ships are mentioned in 3.16 and 29) and the realisation that the Peloponnesians, despite their failure to complete their mission in this case (3.29-31), were actually willing to assist states that wished to revolt, something which appears to have been discussed at Sparta at the meeting of the allies in 432 B.C. (1.122.1), but had not been put into effect before now.

7) 5.83.4 provides a sufficiently close parallel to the presentation of the charges here after ἐπικαλῶ with first an abstract noun in the accusative case, then a clause introduced by ὅτι, having the alleged wrongdoer as its subject (3.36.2 is different at this point in that the ὅτι clause explains τὴν (τε) ἄλλην ἀπόστασιν) and then a further clause, describing a second related charge, without ὅτι and with a subject other than the wrongdoer (as in 3.36.2).—The textual problem posed by ἀπάραντος in 5.83.4 is not of relevance to this discussion.

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 understood2). 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 translation3):

Αἱρε τὰ δικτυα ταῦτα, κακόσχολε, μηδ’ ἐπίτηδες ἵσχιον ἐρχομένη σύστρεφε, λυσίδικη.

Take off those nets, procrastinator, stop twisting your hips so purposefully as you walk, Lysidike. 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’indescenza ripugnante". 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 (Jacobs, Dübner, Stadtmüller, Paton, Waltz, and Beckby) print βύσσῳ, G-P print βυσσῷ, which is quite another word. In the words of L.S.J., βύσσος (feminine) means "flax, and the linen made from it", while βυσσός (masculine) means "depth of the sea": they are as different as βίος and βιός, '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 βυσσῷ 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 βυσσῷ 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, βύσσος 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 βύσσος 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.

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 βύσσος is more prob-