Catullus’ Mullets and Radishes (c. 15.18-19)

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Received January 2016 | Accepted March 2016

Adultery was a serious offense in Rome, and the penalties for it were brutal. While most are easily understood, the rationale for one of them remains uncertain: the insertion of a mullet and a radish into the adulterer’s anus. Consideration of the physical properties of these objects reveals that the Roman punishment serves the same purpose as a similar method employed by the Greeks: to humiliate the adulterer by symbolically converting his anus into a vagina, and then violating it with a phallic radish.1

In order to understand the Roman practice, it is helpful to examine its Greek analogues. If an Athenian caught a man having intercourse with a free woman attached to his household, he could inflict a variety of punishments on him. The perpetrator apprehended in flagrante delicto could be prosecuted or fined.2 If he was unable to pay restitution, the husband could depilate his testicles and anus with hot ash and shove a radish up his rectum (rhaphanidosis).3 According to the scholia recentiora to Aristophanes’ Plutus 168g, the depilation (and, presumably, the rhaphanidosis) took place in the middle of the agora. The scholia explain that the goal of this ordeal was not simply revenge, but also humiliation. Depilation of the vagina was a female practice aimed at rendering

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1 This radish was not the small, bulbous variety popular today, but resembled an enlarged carrot. See Holleran 2012, 136 and plate 3.8 for a fresco from Ostia that depicts this vegetable.
2 Prosecution: Arist. Ath. 59.3; Hyp. Lyc. Fine: Call. Com. fr. 1 KA; Cratin. fr. 81 KA; Lys. 1.25; D. 59.41, 65. For the scholarly dispute over whether it was lawful for an aggrieved party to execute an adulterer, see Harris 1990, 370-377; Robson 2013, 93-98.
a woman sexually desirable; the radish made the adulterer εὐρύπρωκτος, an indication that he was used frequently for intercourse (Ar. Nu. 1083-1084). The purpose of this punishment, then, was to transform the anus into a vagina symbolically through depilation and then to violate it with a phallic radish. This allowed the aggrieved party to reassert his masculinity over an adulterer who had encroached on the women in his domain.

The Romans, too, inflicted a variety of punishments on adulterers, some of them identical to Athenian practices. Offenders were beaten, fined, castrated, raped, irrumated, or killed. Three sources mention a more unusual punishment. According to Juvenal (10.315-317), some adulterers had a mullet (mugilis) shoved into their anuses. The scholiast describes it as a piscis grandi capite, postremus exilis, qui in podicem moechorum deprehensorum soleba[n]t inmitti. Catullus mentions an expanded version of this punishment at 15.18-19, where he warns Aurelius against having intercourse with his young lover, Juvenius.

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4 See Kilmer 1982, 104-112; Bain 1982, 8; Bonfante 1989, 552; Carey 1993, 53-55; Kapparis 1996, 75-76; Robson 2013, 121-122. Ael. VH 12.12 says that the people of Cretan Gortyn feminized adulterers by making them wear garlands of wool like women.

5 Cohen 1985, 385-387 suggests that Aristophanes fabricated the practice of rhaphanidosis because there is no reference to it in prose. Carey 1993, 53-55 argues that prose authors would not mention it because they tend to avoid graphic descriptions of sexuality.

6 See Dover 1989, 106. Rosivach 1978, 214-216 and Kapparis 1996, 67-70 argue that the alleged Athenian practice of inserting a scorpion fish into the anus of an adulterer is fictional. It is based on a fragment of Plato Comicus (189.22 KA) in which a character is reading a passage from a book about cooking fish. When he comes to the scorpion fish, his interlocutor expresses his desire that it sting him on the anus. There is nothing in the context to indicate any link to the punishment of adulterers.

7 During the Republic, adultery was a domestic affair that became a legal matter under the lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis. See Richlin 1981, 379-404; McGinn 1998, 140-142.

8 Beaten: Pl. Mil. 1401-1424; Hor. S. 1.2.41-43; Juv. 10.316-317; Gel. 17.18. Fined: Pl. Mil. 1420-1422; Hor. S. 2.7.67. Castrated: Pl. Cur. 30, Mil. 1397-1426, Poen. 862-863; Hor. S. 1.2.44-46; Mart. 2.60. Mutilated: Mart. 2.83, 3.85, 3.92. Raped: Hor. S. 1.2.44; Mart. 2.47. Irrumated: Mart. 2.47, 2.83. Killed: Hor. S. 2.7.67; Calp. Decl. 48, 49; Juv. 10.316. Valerius Maximus (6.1.13) provides a list of specific individuals who were beaten, castrated, or raped at the hands of slaves. Horace (S. 1.2.133-134) lists financial loss, diminished reputation, and an unspecified threat to the buttocks, which may refer to beating, rape, or rhaphanidosis. See Treggiari 1991, 271-275; Sussman 1994, 226-230; Gowers 2012, 117.

9 Kapparis 1996, 69-70 doubts that mullets were ever used in this way because Juvenal says that it was plus quam lex ulla dolori concessit (10.315). Campana 2004, 325, however, argues that this reflects an earlier practice that was replaced by the penalties specified by the lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis. Richardson 1963, 101 speculates that ‘mullet’ could be a euphemism for the penis.