

Symbolism in *contus cum malo*? (Petronius *Satirae* 56)

Serisapia et contumelia: "aecrophagie saele data sunt et contus¹⁾ cum malo". Theophilus Studer (*Gymn. Bernensis Ann. lect. 1839*), regarded *contus cum malo* as an ithyphallic symbol: simul ad obscoenam illius conti cum malo significationem allusio facta est (p. 17)²⁾. By the same token, Studer thought that the puzzling Ms. word *aecrophagie* (which probably conceals *xerophagie* or something like it), represented *aeschrophagiae* (*aeschrophagiae solae*: Heinsius). Given the context of absurdity in which the *apophoreta* of this chapter are presented, in which

1) Burmann: for *centus*.

2) *cf.* Heinsius quoted in Buecheler's commentary *ad loc.*

sound takes consistent precedence over sense, xerophagie (ae) certainly consorts better with *serisapia*³⁾ than would *aeschroph.* etc.

However, the presence of obscenely shaped edible objects in fertility ritual is well established by ancient examples both literary and pictorial⁴⁾, and it seems that with the passage of time, these objects could appear on more secular occasions, perhaps as general "good luck" symbols and to avert the evil eye. Thus we have a rather elaborate confection: *Priapus a pistore factus* in *Satirae* 60, and more to the point of the present discussion, a *Priapus Siligineus* is one of the *apophoreta* of Martial XIV 69: *Si vis esse satur, nostrum potes esse Priapum / ipsa licet rodas inguina, purus eris.*

In favour of the view that some kind of ithyphallic symbol is intended by *contus c. malo*, we may adduce the following considerations:

(1) The thematic importance of Priapus in the *Satirae* as a whole⁵⁾ renders the supposition of a phallic or Priapic symbol at this point not at all unreasonable. We may recall the attempt to appease the (yet once more) offended Priapus in the Oenothea episode (138) by employing the *scortium fascinum*⁶⁾ as an instrument of "sympathetic magic" to cure Encolpius' impotence (and make amends for the killing of the sacred goose of that deity).

(2) *Contus* = *phallus*, by direct identification in *Carmen Priapeum* XI, 3 (Vollmer)⁷⁾: *traiectus conto sic extendere pedali*, — part of a threat that Priapus makes to intruders in the garden. For the parallel analogy in Greek, we might refer to

3) It suggests also the ancient "wet" versus "dry" theme.

4) Objects of this kind were associated with the *Λικνοφορία*: J. E. Harrison, *Prolegomena*, Cambridge 1903, pp. 122, 145. p. 520 has an illustration of phallic-shaped bread (from Baumeister Denkmäler p. 449). cf. also: Athenaeus, XIV 677 a; Schol. Iuv. II 53; Lobeck, *Aglaophamus* 1050, 1067—68 — survival into comparatively recent times of the custom of making such objects. L. R. Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, Oxford 1907, III, 45, 99. H. Herter, *De Priapo*, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche u. Vorarbeiten XXIII Gießen 1932, p. 167 (cf. PW XIX 1744).

5) E. Klebs, *Zur Composition von Petronius Satirae*, Philologus, 47, 1889, pp. 623—635. Herter, p. 317.

6) cf. K. Latte, *Hipponacteum*, Hermes, 1929, pp. 385—387.

7) P. L. M. (Teubner) Lips. 1923 II 2. *Priapea*.

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, 991 where [*αἰδοῖον*] = *σκυτάλα Λακωνικά*⁸⁾.

(3) Some of the Priapic figures that are of less sophisticated construction look like more or less fortuitously shaped pieces of wood, mere stumps with a projecting branch that is not unlike a *contus*: "Facillime eius figura ex ligno bifurco nascebatur" (H. Herter, *De Priapo* p. 5).

Against these points, we can set the following objections:

(a) Though it is assured that as a garden-god, Priapus was often associated with the apple (*malum*) — indeed he is made out of apple-wood in Carmen Priapeum LXI (Vollmer), *malum* can hardly represent *testiculi* in *c. cum m.*, since *testiculi* are repeatedly a symbol of duality⁹⁾ — *Satirae* 35: *supra geminos testiculos ac rienes posuit*. We have no reason to change *malo* to *malis*, and even if we did this we should have plurality rather than distinct duality.

(b) In statues of Priapus there is emphasis upon the *phallus* rather than the *testiculi*¹⁰⁾; even the larger statues do not seem to possess *scrota* (Herter 178).

(c) The jokes in this set of *apophoreta* contain no overt verbal references to sexual impropriety, but derive their impact from an absurd play upon similar sounds; in this they are unlike those of Martial, Bk. XIV.

(d) Though the word *contumelia* can refer to *stuprum*, it seldom seems to do so immediately, or without the assistance of qualifying words¹¹⁾.

In view of these considerations, one can hardly do other than conclude that the evidence directly favouring the interpretation of Studer is insufficient. Particularly significant from

8) *cf. ibid.* 982.

9) Th. Birt. *Zu Catull u. Petron*, Rheinisches Museum, N. F. 51, 1896, pp. 468—470.

10) Nevertheless, the word *testis* offers too easy an opportunity for double entendre to be altogether resisted by the authors of *Priapea* e. g.: XV 7 (Vollm.) *magnis testibus ista res agetur. cf. Plautus, Miles* 1426.

11) Cicero, *de Harusp. Resp.* 20. 42; Livy 29. 8. Apuleius, *Apol.* 12 (following Plato) speaks of the celestial (as distinct from the demotic) Venus that protects those who are beautiful in soul and body from the *contumelia* (ὕβρις) of lovers. The word *contumelia*, on the whole, seems to lack precise definition (Mommsen, *Römisches Strafrecht*, Leipz. 1899, p. 788 n. 2; A. Berger, *Encycl. Dict. Roman Law*, Philadelphia 1953, *sub voce*).

this point of view is the generally "abstract" nature of ithyphallic symbols, a quality not only to be observed in the primitive *Priapi* illustrated by Herter, but in the attribution of sexual characteristics to menhirs, — maleness to the end tooth of a comb, last pillar of a stairway etc.¹²) It is however possible to speculate, with appropriate caution, that where the "*contus cum malo*" *apophoreton* was handed over by the attendant to its recipient, the author may have wished his readers to imagine a piece of by-play of the "medium unguem" kind with the *contus* (Iuv. 10, 52—53 (and Schol.); Martial II 28,2). Furthermore, it may just be possible to postulate other such vulgar references (now lost) in the *apophoreta* of this chapter, whose representation of infantile and chaotic absurdity may be a screen for scurrilous allusions that yet await elucidation.

12) *Hastings' Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (London) Vol. IX
819, 820, 825 (Hartland); on the sex of megaliths, R. A. S. McAlister,
Archaeology of Ireland, London 1949 ed. 2. pp. 92—93.