

PEPEDI/DIFFISSA NATE FIGUS:
PRIAPIC REVENGE IN HORACE,
SATIRES 1. 8

In the opening line of Horace, *Satires* 1.8, the Priapus statue serving as the poem's speaker pointedly describes his ligneous background by announcing *olim truncus eram ficulnus, inutile lignum* – "I was once a stem of figwood, a worthless log." Hellenistic and Roman authors frequently place poems in the mouths of artifacts¹); convention apparently stipulated that such narrators make passing reference to their material origins²). Yet Horace's Priapus is not content with merely one, perfunctory, allusion to his natal timber. Line 47, at the satire's dénouement, reiterates his claim to figly provenance with the word *ficus*; it calls further attention to this fact by locating *ficus* in a metrically emphatic position, so that it creates a rather uncommon, "feminine", caesura in the third foot of the hexameter line (*diffissa nate ficus: at illae currere in urbem*)³). Furthermore, lines 46–47 contain yet another deviation from what appear to be established poetic traditions. Anal apertures do not rate mention as key, or even as typical, features of Priapic images; poetic lore about Priapus refers to the anus frequently, but solely as an organ Priapus threatens to molest, with his *magna mentula*, in others⁴). Nevertheless, Priapus here takes revenge with his own

1) Chiefly statues – e. g. Callimachus' seventh *Iambus* (fr. 197 Pfeiffer) and twenty-fourth epigram, Propertius 4.2 and several of the Latin *Priapea* (in particular 6, 10, 25, 43, 56, 63 and 73); such manufactured items as a bowl (*A. P.* VI. 113), boat (*A. P.* IX. 131) and pen (*A. P.* IX. 162) are assigned verses as well.

2) Cf. Propertius 4.2.59 (*stipes acernus eram*); *Priapea* 6.1–2 (*quod sum ligneus... | et falx lignea ligneusque penis*), 10.4 (*lignum rude vilicus dolavit*), 25.1–2 (*hoc sceptrum, quod ab arbore ut recisum est | nulla iam poterit virere fronde*); 63.9–12 (*huc adde, quod me terribilem fuste | manus sine arte rusticae dolaverunt | ... | cucurbitarum ligneus vocor custos*); *A. P.* VI. 113; *A. P.* IX. 131 and 162.1.

3) Of the *Satire*'s 50 lines, only 47 and five others (7, 12, 22, 35 and 44) feature "feminine" caesuras.

4) For *culus* in the *Priapea*, see 11.4, 31.4, 58.2 and 68.6; for *podex* 77.9. Other references to the god's anal penetration of his "victims", and willing partners, include 3 (on his *amor pedicandi*), 7, 13, 15, 17, 22 (*femina si furitum*

anus, frightening the troublesome and meddlesome witches Canidia and Sagana with explosive wind-breaking (*pepedi/diffissa nate*).

Few discussions of *Satires* 1.8 have attempted to account for these two literary anomalies. Most studies generally offer *literal* explanations of lines 46–47 – citing the tendency of figwood to split in the sunshine, even speculating that the sight of an actual Priapus statue “with an oddly warped posterior” in Maecenas’ gardens inspired Horace to write the poem⁵). One recent critic assumes Priapus to break wind accidentally, because the witches have terrorized him into “losing control of himself”; this article maintains that Horace here presents a Priapus who is uncharacteristically fearful in order to reverse literary convention and “illustrate the surprising power of laughter”⁶). But nothing in the poem suggests that Priapus ever *fears* the witches; *ut non testis inultus* in 44 would even imply that Priapus emits his anal explosion intentionally⁷). What is more, this, Horatian, Priapus achieves the same results from anal exertions – routing those who trespass against him – that the god portrayed in the poems of the *Corpus Priapeorum* hopes to obtain with his phallus, after injuring the anuses of trespassers. Horace may reverse literary convention in *Satires* 1.8, but in his choice of the anus as Priapus’ vengeful organ rather than in his characterization of Priapus himself.

Yet literary evidence, chiefly from Priapean poetry, may help us to understand why, at the climax of this satire, Horace’s

faciet mihi virve puerve| haec cunnum, caput hic praebeat, ille nates), 25, 28, 35, 38, 41, 51, 59, 67, 69, 71, 74, 76; 25, 40, 48 and 73 all concern *pathicae puellae*.

5) See most recently N. Rudd, *The Satires of Horace* (Cambridge 1966) 70–72, who follows both P. LeJay in his commentary on Horace’s *Satires* (Paris 1911) 229 and A. Kiessling – R. Heinze in theirs (Berlin 1957) 137 when underlining the fissibility of figwood. See also E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1957) 123. Both Kiessling–Heinze (p. 143) and W. Schetter, *Antike und Abendland* 17 (1971) 158 view the second reference to figwood as merely a conscious echo of the first.

6) W. S. Anderson, *AJP* 93 (1972) 6–7, 8, 11, 13.

7) At line 18 Priapus refers to the witches as a *curae... atque labori*, and at 45 he claims that they made him shudder (*horruerim*), but he never owns up to being intimidated by them. We should also note that Greek comic literature portrays the anal response to terror not as farting, but as diarrhea, total loss of bowel control. Cf. Dionysus’ conduct at 308 of Aristophanes’ *Frogs*; cf. also the observations on this play by G. Wills, *Hermes* 97 (1969) 313 ff., who contends that *crepitus ventris* functions as a form of combative self-assertion at lines 237 ff.

Priapus alludes – with the word *ficus* – to his figwood form a second time and resorts, ironically, to anal vengeance. From examining the use not only of the Latin term *ficus* itself, but also that of its related adjective *ficosus* and even the collective noun *ficetum*, it seems clear that it is a “loaded word”, closely connected with the portrayal of the anus, and particularly the anus injured as a result of retaliatory penile penetration. That *ficus* possesses “anal” connotations appears certain from the testimony of various Latin medical writers, who employ both the Greek word *σύνκωσις*, “fig growth”, and *ficus* for excrescences arising on that part of the anatomy⁸). Both Martial 1.65 and 14.86 and a Pompeian inscription (*C.I.L.* IV. 1820) also employ *ficus* in contexts which suggest that the term must have designated “piles” or anal ulcerations, although without specifying that such physical deformities result from anal intercourse⁹). But two of the *Priapea*, 51 and 69, each of which technically utilizes *ficus* in its literal sense of “fig tree” or “fig fruit”, describe Priapus as promising to retaliate against those who steal *fici* from his garden by penetrating them anally¹⁰); they therefore link the word, albeit tenuously, with vindictive punishment *per anum*. Martial 6.49, spoken by a cypress-wood Priapusstatue, represents the phallus-proud god predicting that a *ficus* will spring up, grafted a *cupressu*, on whoever wrongs him; as a

8) Celsus 6.3.1, Placitus, *Med.* 11.7; Marcellus, *Med.* 31.16 (coily, with *ficos qui nascuntur in locis verecundioribus*); Dioscurides 1.32. Cassius Felix uses *συνκωσιός* to describe a medication for anal hemorrhoids. The ancients’ view of “piles” as “swellings to be excised” is also reflected at Juvenal 2.12; he refers to them with another word for fig, *marisca*, and attributes them to passive involvement in anal sex (as do other Latin authors, see below, notes 11, 15 and 16). An association between the fig and the anus appears in a gloss by Hesychius – *συνκιδαφόρος: ἐνλοτε ὁ συνκοφάντης: ποτὲ δὲ ὁ συνόπρωκτος* – as well; V. Buchheit, *RhM* 103 (1960) 200ff., in analyzing the sexual symbolism of figs in ancient epigram, calls attention to the fruit’s anal as well as other sexual connotations; he maintains, on pp. 218ff., as I do below, that *ficus* and *ficetum* can mean *pathicus* or *anus pathicus* without reference to physical disability. M. Citroni’s commentary on Martial I (Florence 1975) 211 notes that medical writers do not apparently connect *fici* and pederasty, and terms the connection “un’ opinione vulgare” – but it is precisely such popular attitudes on which Martial’s, and Priapean, poetry capitalize for their humorous effect.

9) Martial 14.86 ascribes them to riding bareback on horses; the other two references leave their etiology altogether unclear. Cf. also Chiron 782.

10) 51.4–6 (*quisquis in nos incidit ... usque curvos excavatur ad lumbos*) / *non ficus hic est praeferenda ...*) and 69. 1–4. For the interpretation of *mentulam cacare* in line 4 of the latter as *pedicari*, see Buchheit (above, n. 8) 144–146.

reading of the *Priapea* and related works testifies that Priapus usually prefers anal penetration as his *modus vulnerandi*, we may infer that *ficus* here must refer to an anal muscular abnormality caused by penile means¹¹). Furthermore, a first century A.D. Greek *Priapeum*, *A.P.* XVI. 240, goes so far as to make an outright identification between the fig-fruit (*ισχάς*) and phallically penetrated, though not necessarily ulcerated, anuses¹²). And, most importantly, Martial 4.52, which puns on *ficus/capri-ficus*, makes sense only if we consider *ficus* not merely a word for the deformed, but also a term for the phallically-penetrated, anus, metonymically employed here for the passive partner in anal congress: the poet laughs at a former pathic who now cohabits (presumably in the active role) with *capri*, goats¹³).

Then there is *ficusus*, which also appears in contexts involving anal penetration inflicted vindictively, and with “pathological” outcome. A passage in the medical writer Marcellus indicates that *ficusus* may generally denote a diseased anus¹⁴). Two of the *Priapea*, however, 41 and 50, employ *ficusus* in the superlative, to describe, respectively, a potential *poeta* (anally) punished by Priapus for failing to pay due literary homage to his godhead, and a *puella* currently unwilling part to take in (anal) cohabitation¹⁵). Martial’s one, repeated use of *ficusus* at 7.71, which explicates the meaning of the word with *ulcere turpi* in 3, would seem to connect it directly with anuses disfigured through penile penetration: the sexual connotations of *unus ager* in 6, and the fact that this particular disorder afflicts all members of this one household – regardless of their age, sex and social station – indeed permit no other interpretation¹⁶). *Ficetum*, on the other hand, must – like *ficus* at Martial 4.52 – only connote the phalli-

11) Cf. 11 *inserta tibi ficus a cupressu*; for the poetic Priapus’ pedicational preferences see the references in note 4 above.

12) Cf. 7–8 (“τάμὰ κατέσθων/σῦκα δὸς εἰθύμῳς ἰσχάδα τὴν ὀπίσω”); cf. also *A.P.* XVI. 241. Aristophanes (*Knights* 259) and Ameipsias (33) appear to employ ἀποσπινάξω for *pedicare*.

13) The interpretation of Buchheit (above, n. 8) 218–223; cf. also A. Forcellini, *Totius Latinitatis Lexicon* III (1865) 74, *Hedylum, puerum pathicum ficum vocat Martial*.

14) *Med.* 31.21.

15) 41.4 *Inter eruditos/ficosissimus ambulet poetas* and 50.2 *Quaedam.../ficosissima me puella ludit| et nec dat mihi nec negat daturam,| causas invenit usque differendi*.

16) Cf. Buchheit (above, n. 8) 227–228, disputing the views of earlier scholars who assigned non-sexual causes to the anal difficulties besetting this household.

cally penetrated anus, and not necessarily that which has been somehow punitively injured. Martial seemingly applies the word, literally meaning “fig orchard”, at 12.33.2 to boys purchased by Labienus for anal sexual activity¹⁷).

We may thus with good reason conclude that to a Roman audience the word *ficus* would have had unmistakable associations with the anus, especially the anus deformed through penile penetration; Horace’s readers would have equally good grounds for connecting *ficus* with the anus slated for disfigurement in an act of revenge by the phallic, and invariably menacing, god Priapus¹⁸). Finally, other evidence from “Priapic” cult would attest to a formal link between the god, particularly his phallus, and the vengefully and/or injuriously penetrated anus: the anus-like aperture created in the clenched-fist, “phallic”, sign of the *ficus*, which is frequently represented on southern Italian amulets related to Priapic worship, and which served to insult males¹⁹); the portrayal at Petronius, *Satyricon* 138 of painful anal penetration with a *fascinum* as a ritual cure for impotence vindictively

17) *Ut pueros emeret Labienus vendidit hortos| nil nisi ficetum nunc Labienus habet.*

18) I accept the thesis of H. Herter, *De Priapo. Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten* 23 (1932) 28 that Roman authors had begun to write “Priapean poetry” by the time of Catullus; indeed, I find Nonius Marcellus’ statement (134 M) *Catullus Priapeo de meo ligurrire libido est* compelling evidence that Catullus himself tried his hand at such verses. Although the extant collection of *Priapea* doubtless postdates Horace’s *Satires* – as does our other, largely Priapean, testimony on the anal connotations of *ficus*, Horace must have had a Priapean poetic tradition on which to draw; his use of punning word play, a notable characteristic of Priapean poetry, in this satire (on which, see below, especially n. 21) may also imply as much. I do not think, however, that the Latin word *ficus* itself – as opposed to *marisca* and the Greek word *σῦκον* (on which see Buchheit [above, n. 8] 201 ff.) – would have also connoted, to a Roman audience, the male or female genitals; neither the article s. v. *ficus* in the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, Vol. 6.1 (Leipzig 1912–1926) colls. 650–654, nor Buchheit provide any examples of *ficus* in such a sense.

19) See R. Payne Knight, *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus, lately existing at Isernia, in the Kingdom of Naples| A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* (London 1886) 4, 28, 148 ff. (especially 149–151 “the thumb forming a phallus”). Payne Knight theorizes – on the basis of modern associations between the fig and a “woman’s quaint”, and the fact that woman wore these amulets as insurance against barrenness – that the aperture signified the vagina. Such an explanation does not, however, account for the use of the *ficus*-sign as an insulting gesture to males, as would the view that the aperture could symbolize both vagina and (male) anus, depending on the sex of the addressee.

visited by Priapus; the suggestion of *Priapea* 25 that the god's *membrum* received worshipful adoration from anal pathics²⁰). These facts strongly suggest that Horace's otherwise gratuitous deployment of *ficus* – a word elsewhere associated with the anus, and vengeful punishment, and Priapus – in a poem about Priapus, at the point where he delineates the god's revenge, and anally-achieved revenge at that, is no coincidence, but rather a conscious, literarily-motivated decision.

Nevertheless, the reversed role assigned the anus in *this* Priapean poem – that of active rather than passive organ, of victimizer rather than victim – still requires some justification. This difficulty, however, is easily amenable to a literary explanation as well, indeed one to be found in Priapean poetic conversion. For, like *Satires* 1.8, where Priapus uses a most un-Priapean form of vengeance (as well as a word connected with revenge obtained not *by*, but *on*, the anus when portraying this vengeance), various *Priapea* also conclude by having the god depict his behavior, or condition, as somehow unexpected and perverse in its nature, and do so through amusing *double-entendres* on sexually-charged, anatomically-related terms. Consider 15.7, with its play on the two meanings – testicles and witnesses – of *testibus*. 7 and 55 are more apposite illustrations, inasmuch as the punning words here (7.2 *blaesa lingua* and 55.6 *Gallus*, alluding to an amputated *mentula*) refer, like *ficus*, to organs and/or organic peculiarities which Priapus-figures are not ordinarily thought to possess. Furthermore, Horace seems to have composed this poem's next-door neighbor, *Satires* 1.7, solely to indulge in a similar *jeu de mots* on *Rex* at 33–35²¹). One might

20) Cf. 3, *quod pathicae petunt puellae* and 5, *cui dant oscula nobiles cinaedi*; on the basis of this poem and assorted other data, Herter (above, n. 18) 227 concludes that Priapus was the *patronus mollium et effeminatorum*.

21) Cf. also the deployment of two anally-associated, ironic and punning expressions earlier in *Satires* 1.8. At 37–39 Priapus swears that if he is telling a lie he will gladly suffer befoulment, and thereby endure having the tables turned on him, by anal products: the *merdis...albis corvorum* on his head (crows being birds Priapus customarily scares away) and the visit of † *Julius et fragilis Pedatia furque Voranus...in me cacatum* (thieves, and other unwelcome guests, are of course habitually victimized by Priapus). LeJay (above, n. 5) 228 remarks that, according to scholiasts, the feminine name Pedatia gibes at the anal pathic behavior of a certain Pedatius. The similarity between its three letters and those of two anally-connected words, *pedicare* and *pedere*, to fart, also deserves our attention: plays on both of these words are found elsewhere in Latin literature – *pedicare* at *Priapea* 58, *pedere* at Martial 4.87. *Testis* in line 44 appears to function as a “Priapean”, though

consequently even impute Horace with here inserting *ficus* to the same end, as it were. Perhaps he assigned his Priapus an anal form of revenge in this poem because *ficus*, the Latin word for the statue's constituent material, also connoted anal irregularities of a sort which this very god was renowned for vindictively causing. Perhaps he wanted the anus for once to have *its* revenge, by serving, in lieu of the phallus, as Priapus' justly vengeful implement²²).

Boston University

Judith P. Hallett

wholly "genital" pun as well; with it Horace has the god remind us of his capacity for more "traditional" Priapean revenge through an allusion to his formidable inguinal endowments.

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