

WHOSE HAIR WANTS CUTTING IN MARTIAL 12.18?

*dispensat pueris rogatque longos
levis ponere vilicus capillos.* (24–25)

The idiom *ponere* (or *deponere*) *capillos* ‘give a haircut’ is amply attested, but whose hair does Martial’s bailiff (*vilicus*) ask to cut? Scholarly opinion is here deeply divided. Many translators and commentators, following the Delphin edition¹ (based largely on T. Farneby’s 1661 *Variorum* edition), assume that Martial means the hair of the slave-boys (*pueri*)². Other scholars prefer the interpretation of L. Ramírez³, that the bailiff seeks permission to cut his own hair⁴. As one editor frankly concedes, “L’interpretazione . . . non è del tutto sicura”⁵.

Those who understand *puerorum* with *capillos* point to the Roman custom of keeping slave-boys with long and sometimes elegantly curled hair (*capillati*) as favoured servants (*deliciae*) to serve the master at table or in bed. The cutting of their hair, coincident with the appearance of their first whiskers, signalled an end to this domestic role and their reassignment to men’s work. Indeed, several translators render *rogatque longos . . . ponere . . . capillos* as “Will I let him cut the youngsters’ hair and set them a man’s work? he wants to know” (Michie) or some similar word-

1) Marci Valerii Martialis epigrammata ex editione Bipontina, ed. V. Collesso (London 1822) 883, 1407.

2) E. g. W. Hay, *Martialis epigrammata selecta* (London 1755), repr. in: *The Epigrams of Martial, translated into English Verse* (London 1888) 553; F. A. Paley and W. H. Stone, *Select Epigrams of Martial* (London 1868) 413; H. M. Stephenson, *Selected Epigrams of Martial* (London 1880) 416; A. L. Francis and H. F. Tatum, *Martial’s Epigrams: Translations and Imitations* (Cambridge 1924) 227; H. M. Poteat, *Select Epigrams of Martial* (New York 1931) 245; J. U. Morera, *Marcial: Epigramas* (Barcelona 1969) 330; G. Norcio, *Epigrammi di Marco Valerio Marziale* (Torino 1980) 755; also the editions cited below, n. 6.

3) M. Val. Martialis epigrammatum libb. XV Laur. Ramiresii de Prado commentariis illustrati (Paris 1607) ad carm. 3.57.

4) E. g. F. Lemaistre and N. A. Dubois, *Œuvres complètes de M. V. Martial*, vol. 2 (Paris 1885) 239; L. Friedländer, *M. Valerii Martialis Epigrammaton libri* (Leipzig 1886) 230; E. Post, *Selected Epigrams of Martial* (Boston, New York, Chicago and London 1908) 295; P. Richard, *Les épigrammes de Martial*, vol. 2 (Paris 1931) 261; H. J. Izaac, *Martial: Epigrammes* (Budé), 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Paris 1961) 162; W. C. A. Ker, *Martial: Epigrams* (Loeb), vol. 2 (Cambridge and London 1968) 333; E. Pasoli, *L’epigramma 12,18 de Marziale*, in: L. Barbesei (ed.), *Scritti in onore di Caterina Vassalini* (Verona 1974) 347–355, at 355; P. Whigham, in J. P. Sullivan and P. Whigham (eds.), *Epigrams of Martial Englished by Divers Hands* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1987) 465, repr. in: J. P. Sullivan and A. J. Boyle (eds.), *Martial in English* (Harmondsworth 1996) 376; D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Martial: Epigrams* (Loeb), vol. 3 (Cambridge and London 1993) 105; M. Scàndola, *Marco Valerio Marziale: Epigrammi* (Milano 1996) 981.

5) Norcio (above, n. 2) 755 n. 6.

ing⁶, even though there is no reference to work in the Latin. As Post rightly notes, the assumption that the slaves are being graduated into the ranks of workers spoils the epigram: “freedom from work, ease of living, is its keynote”. Post also points out that *capillati*, long-haired slave boys, belong to the luxury of city life; we do not expect to find them on Martial’s rustic estate at Bilbilis⁷. The keeping of *capillati*, handsome pages who might also serve as catamites, is well attested at Rome⁸. But Martial, while not adverse to homosexual relations (12.96), had no such pretty boys. In an earlier poem (2.43) he complains that Candidus has a train of luscious Ganymedes that he will not share with his friends, while Martial’s only Ganymede is, *sensu obscaeno*, his own hand⁹. Martial does admit that his huntsman (*venator*) might be worth a secret tryst in the woods (12.18, lines 22–23), but there is no indication that he keeps *capillati*. The plural *pueris* also tells against this interpretation: it is highly unlikely that all his slave-boys have reached puberty, and thus need their hair cut, at the same time.

The alternative view, that the bailiff wants permission to cut his own hair, is hardly more attractive. If *levis* means that he is clean-shaven (*novacula rasus*, as the Delphin edition explains¹⁰), it is unclear why he should need the master’s leave to trim his hair as well. Post’s suggestion that the bailiff is still a boy, and wants to cut his hair to appear grown-up¹¹, is highly improbable in view of his supervisory position and his having a wife (*vilica*, line 21).

Since neither traditional interpretation is convincing, an entirely different solution is proposed here. Despite the absence of a pronoun with *rogat*, the sentence clearly implies that the bailiff asks Martial’s permission¹². Why should we not also understand that it is Martial’s hair? At Rome, Martial’s hair is described as stubborn (*contumax*), in contrast with the curled hair (*flexa coma*) of a Greek acquaintance (10.65). This has been taken to mean that Martial’s hair is neatly trimmed in the Roman fashion¹³. In fact, Martial says nothing about his hair’s length, but he does

6) J. Michie, *The Epigrams of Martial* (London 1972) 181, repr. as: *Martial: The Epigrams* (Harmondsworth 1978) 177. Cf. J. A. Pott and F. A. Wright, *Martial: The Twelve Books of Epigrams* (London and New York, n.d.) 378 (“he wants my leave to crop their locks and make them work”); R. Humphries, *Martial: Select Epigrams* (Bloomington 1963) 104 (“If they look like men, he can work them longer”).

7) Post (above, n. 4) 295.

8) J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago and London 1980) 78; R. MacMullen, *Roman Attitudes to Greek Love*, *Historia* 31 (1982) 484–502, at 491; A. D. Booth, *Une de capillatis ... Egnati*, *EMC* 4 (1985) 111–120, at 113; P. Veyne, *A History of Private Life*, vol. 1 (Cambridge and London 1987) 79.

9) Martial did have a female *deliciae* named Erotion, but she died at age five (*Martial* 5.34, 5.37, 10.61).

10) Cf. 10.65, where *levis* refers to the use of depilatories.

11) Post (above, n. 4) 295.

12) *Rogo*, normally followed by an indirect command or indirect question, here takes an infinitive. *Rogatque ponere* must therefore be equivalent to *me rogat ut ponat*. The translation of Francis and Tatum (above, n. 2) 227, “A dapper steward seeking heads to shear”, is grammatically inadmissible.

13) Booth (above, n. 8) 113 n. 8. More convincing is the proposal of Paley and Stone (above, n. 2) 357, that *contumax* means Martial’s hair is too stiff to be curled.

use hair unguent and trims his bristly beard (11.39). Now, however, Martial has abandoned his urban elegance: he sleeps late, wears informal clothes, ambles in the countryside, and eats home-made stew¹⁴. In this relaxed atmosphere, Martial has undoubtedly let his hair grow long, and the bailiff thinks it is time to trim his master's scruffy and unseemly locks. As Stephenson says of the bailiff (though assuming the slaves' hair is meant), "perhaps the long hair shocked his rustic notions of propriety"¹⁵. The juxtaposition of *capillos* at the end of line 25 with *sic me vivere* at the beginning of 26, is perhaps the poet's hint that the *capillos* belong to *me*.

Why would Martial get his hair cut by his bailiff, when he could presumably visit a professional barber in nearby Bilbilis? It is evident from the poem that Martial is content to relax in the countryside; no allusion is made to visiting the town. There is no need for him to leave his farm for a haircut, since he has servants at home who can do the job; and the most trusted of these would be the *vilicus*. In any event, it seems to have been common practice, at least in the provinces, for slaves to give haircuts to their masters and to each other. The *Lex Vipascensis*, a set of regulations for a mining town in western Spain, prescribes that only the lessee of the *tonstrinum* is allowed to practise barbering, but "[exciuntur servi] qui dominos aut conservos suos curaverint"¹⁶. Thus it would be perfectly natural for Martial's hair to be cut by his senior slave.

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14) Cf. G. Highet, *Juvenal the Satirist* (Oxford 1954) 18.

15) Stephenson (above, n. 2) 416.

16) CIL II, 5181 = Dessau, ILS 6891, lines 39–40.