



DOWN IN POMPEII: A SEXUAL GRAFFITO IN VERSE (CIL 4.9123)*

ABSTRACT

This article revisits a famous graffiti poem from Pompeii (CIL 4.9123). It argues that the poem is both more erotically charged and more cleverly metaliterary than previously recognized; and that this reading of the poem offers new evidence for the literary richness of Pompeii's graffiti culture.

Keywords: Pompeii; graffiti; Ovid; erotic poetry

This note concerns a famous and enigmatic Pompeian verse graffito (CIL 4.9123). A fresh reading of this text—with particular regard to its sexualized language and poetic form—offers new evidence of the literary richness of Pompeii's graffiti culture.

The graffito comprises a four-line poem in pentameters from beside a tavern doorway:

nihil durare potest tempore perpetuo
cum bene sol nituit, redditur oceano
decrescit Phoebe, quae modo plena fuit
uentorum feritas saepe fit aura l[e]uis

Nothing can endure for all time;
After the sun has shone, it returns to the ocean.
The moon shrinks, which was recently full.
The wildness of winds often becomes a light breeze.

Scholars have for a long time been intrigued by this poem. Its admirers and editors include A.E. Housman; more recently, Kristina Milnor offered a discussion of its literary dimensions in her book on Pompeii's literary landscape.¹

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¹ A.E. Housman, 'An African inscription', *CR* 41 (1927), 60–1; K. Milnor, *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape in Roman Pompeii* (Oxford and New York, 2014), 69–72. The graffito was first published in M. Della Corte, *Pompeii, the New Excavations: Houses and Inhabitants* (Pompeii, 1925), 80; Della Corte's own drawing (an 'esatto apografo') made on the day of discovery (M. Della Corte, 'Scavi sulla Via dell'Abbondanza (epigrafi inedite)', *NSA* [1927], 89–116, at 116, reprinted in *CIL*) is the only surviving record of the graffito because the wall on which it was written collapsed in 1915. Other editions include E. Diehl, *Pompeianische wandinschriften und verwandtes* (Berlin and Boston, 1930), no. 1100; *CLE* 2292. For full references to earlier discussions of this graffito, see A. Varone, *Erotica Pompeiana: Love Inscriptions on the Walls of Pompeii* (Rome, 2002), 109 n. 175.

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transcription of the final line as *Venerum feritas saepe fit dura leuis* ('the **hard** fierceness **of love** often becomes light'). Housman, Todd and others pushed back on this reading because it fits neither the metre nor palaeography.⁷ Existing erotic interpretations are also strikingly non-physical, focussing on the loss and transience of love.⁸

The aim of this note is to revive the erotic interpretation of these pentameter verses, and indeed to argue that they contain an even stronger erotic charge than has been previously suggested.⁹ Moreover, I suggest that this erotic charge makes the choice of pentameter even more salient—and more cleverly metaliterary—than Milnor implies.

The verses are full of potential sexual innuendo. The verbs *durare* ('endure' or 'stay hard', 1) and *decrescere* ('grow small', 3) have obvious application to the hardening and softening of a penis.¹⁰ This is especially so in combination with the reference to Phoebe having been 'recently full' (*modo plena*), a possible allusion to a past erection.¹¹ Together, the three images of the poem—the sun shining and then setting; the moon waning; the ferocity (*ferocitas*) of the winds abating—can figuratively represent penile detumescence.¹²

One possibility is to take this poem as a reflection on impotence.¹³ Such a reading might be supported by the reference to the passing of time (*nihil durare potest tempore perpetuo*, 1)—potentially an allusion to the onset of old age—with several possible literary parallels. We might think of Catull. 16.11 on the old men who 'cannot move their hard limbs' (*duros nequeunt mouere lumbos*), where *duros* is pointedly ambiguous; it

⁷ Housman (n. 1), 61; Todd (n. 3), 170; cf. F.C. Wick, *Vindiciae carminum Pompeianorum* (Naples, 1916), 18 and Diehl (n. 1), 80. For discussion of different readings and justifications of this line, see M. Gigante, *Civiltà delle forme letterarie nell'antica Pompei* (Naples, 1979), 238, who prefers *uentorum* over *Venerum* but also proposes the reading *Austrorum*.

⁸ So, for example, Gigante (n. 7), 237–9; P.P.A. Funari, *La cultura popular en la antigüedad clásica* (Seville, 1991), 67–8. For other loose amatory readings, see Varone (n. 1), 109–10; M. Della Corte, *Amori e amanti di Pompei antica* (Pompei, 1958), 32; E. Montero Cartelle, *Priapeos: grafitos amatorios Pompeyanos* (Madrid, 1981), 127–8. It appears as one of the graffiti 'colti' in L. Canali and G. Cavallo, *Graffiti Latini: scrivere sui muri a Roma antica* (Milan, 1991), 32–3.

⁹ This erotic reading is compatible with either Housman or Della Corte's reading of the text (though I lean towards the former, since I am convinced by Housman's arguments about both metre and letter-form).

¹⁰ One parallel for such terms being used explicitly sexually at Pompeii is *CIL* 4.10085: *phallus durus Cr(escentis) uastus*, 'the huge hard dick of Crescens ('the Grower')'; see J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London, 1982), 64. For literary examples of the verb *durescere* describing an erection, see J.T. Katz and K. Volk, 'Erotic hardening and softening in Vergil's eighth eclogue', *CQ* 56 (2006), 169–74, at 173 on *Ecl.* 8.80 (*limus ut hic durescit*); they suggest parallels with Plaut. *Truc.* 914–16 and Verg. *Ecl.* 4.28–30; on the latter, see R.G.M. Nisbet, 'Adulescens puer (Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.28–30)', in H.D. Jocelyn (ed.), *Tria Lustra: Essays and Notes presented to John Pinsent* (Liverpool, 1993), 265–7, at 266. For *crescere* applied to the *mentula* ('penis') and meaning 'swell', see *Priapea* 81.2.

¹¹ *OLD* s.v. *plenus* 7: '(of the body or its parts) filled out, plump, swollen'; for *plenus* applied to a penis, see Ov. *Rem.* 401 (*pleno si corpore sumes*), an explicitly sexual context (on *corpus* as 'penis', see Adams [n. 10], 46).

¹² For an example of the imagery of waxing/waning moon and raging winds in close proximity to a discussion of erotic love, see Prop. 3.5.23–30; for the imagery of cold winds (*frigoris ... aura*) putting an end to sex, see *Priapea* 61.6–7. The imagery of a female goddess (Phoebe) is striking; for another feminization of a deflated penis, see Petron. *Sat.* 132.11, where *illa* describes both Dido and Encolpius' penis; on the common practice of referring to the penis elliptically, via feminine adjectives with *mentula* deleted, see Adams (n. 10), 62.

¹³ Impotence is, of course, a preoccupation of Roman poets: Latin literary references to impotence, both temporary and permanent and deploying a variety of imagery and vocabulary, include Mart. 11.46; Ov. *Am.* 3.7.66 (the 'drooping rose', *hesterna ... rosa*); Petron. *Sat.* 132.

could mean 'hard' (because erect) or 'stiff' (with age). Another possible parallel is Prop. 3.5, where the poet turns to discuss winds and the waxing/waning of the moon after 'old age has cut off love' (*Venerem grauis interceperit aetas*, 3.5.23).¹⁴ However, it is striking that our graffito poem is written in the present tense, and the cyclical imagery (of sun, moon and winds) gestures not to permanent deflation but to the possibility of future rearousal.¹⁵ It is therefore equally likely that the poem is a wistful reflection on the aftermath of sex: the calm after the sexual storm.

Whether we read the poem as a reflection on impotence or on the post-coital slump, the unusual pentameter form reinforces an erotic reading of these lines centred on the physical form of the penis. Two associations of pentameters in literature are relevant here: first, the play between (metrical) 'foot' and 'penis';¹⁶ and second, the link between pentameters and 'deflation' or 'descent'. Ovid playfully aligns the rise and fall of hexameter and pentameter with the cycle of penile erection and detumescence, punning on the polyvalence of *neruus* ('sinew', 'muscle', 'strength', 'literary vigour', 'penis') (*Am.* 1.1.17–18):

cum bene surrexit uersu noua pagina primo
attenuat neruos proximus ille meos.

My new page rose well in its first verse;
the second verse diminishes my strength.

As Judith Hallett notes, Ovid here 'characterizes the elegiac metre as ... alternatively soaring and sinking, like the physical equipment, alternatively turgid and detumescent, that men require to perform acts of love'.¹⁷ The string of four deflated pentameters in this graffitied poem could thus be read as a mimetic reflection of the now flaccid penis that the verses evoke: no longer rising and falling but in a steady 'sunken' and 'shrunken' state. The verses are all 'lighter measures' (*numeris leuioribus*, *Ov. Am.* 1.1.19) like the 'light' breeze that they describe (*[l]euis*, 4).

Notably, quotations and calques of verses by Ovid and other poets appear frequently amongst the graffiti of Pompeii, suggesting a broader literary familiarity with elegiac motifs.¹⁸ It is thus plausible that at least some readers of these verses would have recognized their metaliterary connections and drawn the link between the pentameters' form and content. The visual arrangement offers further clues to a reader: the imitation

¹⁴ Note in *plenum luna ... redit*, 3.5.28; cf. in our graffito *redditur*, 2; *plena*, 3.

¹⁵ Priapic poetry is often written in the present or future tense; for a brief comment, see E.M. Young, 'The touch of the *cinaedus*', *CLAnt* 34 (2015), 183–208, at 192.

¹⁶ For play between 'penis' and 'foot', see, for example, Tib. 1.8.13–14, 1.9.13–16; *Ov. Am.* 1.1.4; Plaut. *Cas.* 465; Auson. *Cent. Nupt.* 104, 107. For the Greek background, see M. Buchan, 'Penelope's foot', *Ramus* 44 (2015), 141–54.

¹⁷ J.P. Hallett, 'Authorial identity in Latin love elegy: literary fictions and erotic failings', in B.K. Gold (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Love Elegy* (Oxford, 2012), 268–84, at 281. This is a widely accepted interpretation of these lines: cf. D.F. Kennedy, *The Arts of Love: Five Studies in the Discourse of Roman Love Elegy* (Cambridge, 1992), 59 (who further notes the polyvalence of *opus*: 'literary work', 'penis', 'sexual intercourse'); R.L. Hunter, 'Sweet nothings – Callimachus fr. 1.9–12 revisited', in G. Bastianini and A. Casanova (edd.), *Callimaco: cent'anni di papyri* (Florence, 2006), 119–31, at 121; A. Keith, 'Sexuality and gender', in P.E. Knox (ed.), *A Companion to Ovid* (Chichester and Malden, MA, 2009), 355–69, at 358.

¹⁸ *Ov. Am.*: *CIL* 4.1520, 1595, 1893, 9847; *Ars Am.*: *CIL* 4.1895, 3149; *Her.*: *CIL* 4.1595, 4133; *Prop.*: *CIL* 4.1520, 1523, 1526, 1528, 1894, 1950, 3040, 4491, 9847; *Tib.*: *CIL* 4.1837. For full lists of literary quotations at Pompeii, see Gigante (n. 7), 253–63; A. Cooley and M.G.L. Cooley, *Pompeii and Herculaneum: A Sourcebook* (London, 2014²), 292–3; Milnor (n. 1), 263–72.

of elegiac couplet form would immediately signal an amatory context.¹⁹ However, the shock absence of the upright hexameter draws attention to the isolated and deflated pentameters: another signpost to the poem's underlying meaning.²⁰

These erotic connections offer one plausible answer to the enigma of these verses. This does not mean that they are the only way to read the poem: given its allusive, figurative nature there may be some deliberate ambiguity here, inviting the reader to offer different guesses about the poem's subject. Yet on the reading presented here, the connections between form and content, and between this graffito and the literary world, are stronger and more meaningful than has been previously suggested. If we accept this interpretation as at least possible, these pentameter verses contribute not only another penis to Pompeii's teeming landscape but also further evidence for the literary sophistication of the reading and writing culture of Pompeii's graffiti.

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¹⁹ For the association of elegiac couplets and love, see T.S. Thorsen, 'Introduction', in T.S. Thorsen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Love Elegy* (Cambridge, 2013), 1–20.

²⁰ For a striking parallel case of an isolated line of pentameter in a graffito from an imperial villa at Boscotrecase, see Cugusi (n. 2), 25 and Morgan (n. 2), 363, who likewise argues that the 'pregnant' absence of the hexameter signals the verse's theme (in this case, a transgressive political commentary). Kruschwitz (n. 2) offers several examples of the meaningfulness and markedness of the pentameter in inscriptions.