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JUVENAL 6. 422–423:
FEMALE GENITAL MASSAGE?

Juvenal portrays a violent woman who, if awakened by a barking dog, commands that her neighbor be dragged off together with his dog and that both of them be flogged (6. 415 ff.). Her character is subsequently developed in the episode that describes her evening activities:¹

...gravis occursu, taeterrima vultu²
balnea nocte subit,³ conchas⁴ et castra moveri
nocte iubet, magno gaudet sudare⁵ tumultu, 420
cum lassata graui ceciderunt braccia massa,
callidus et cristae digitos inpressit aliptes
ac summum dominae femur exclamare coegit.

¹ Text and apparatus here and below are based on Willis 1997 and Clausen 1959 with minor corrections, additions, and abridgements.

² Friedländer 1895, 333 (followed by Knoche 1950; Labriolle–Villeneuve 1967, 76; Martyn 1987 and Braund 2024, 274) argues for punctuating after *vultu*, thus having *gravis* <...> *vultu* refer to the preceding, but this seems unlikely, since *gravis occursu* implies the process of moving. Pace Friedländer, v. 413–418a and 418b ff. must refer to the same woman.

³ Friedländer 1895, 333 is probably right that a private, not a public bath is meant.

⁴ The form and function of these vessels are debated (see Watson–Watson 2014, 214); possibly, basins or bathtubs (Courtney 2013, 274, following Friedländer 1895).

⁵ Pace Watson–Watson (2014, 214), this refers not to sweating during exercise and massage, but to the *sudatorium* following these activities, as is generally recognized: the use of the iterative *cum* with perfect predicates excludes a simultaneous interpretation. Friedländer 1895, 334 (with references) points out that sweating was meant not only to improve digestion, but also to evoke thirst; hence imbibing large quantities of wine prior to eating, in order to empty the stomach through vomiting (cf. n. 20 below); these activities were also typical of athletes.

convivae miseri interea somnoque fameque
 urguntur. tandem illa venit rubicundula, totum 425
 oenophorum sitiens, plena quod tenditur urna
 admotum pedibus, de quo sextarius alter
 ducitur ante cibum rabidam facturus orexin,
 dum redit et loto terram ferit intestino.
 marmoribus rivi properant, aurata Falernum 430
 pelvis olet; nam sic, tamquam alta in dolia longus
 deciderit serpens, bibit et vomit. ergo maritus
 nauseat atque oculis bilem substringit opertis.

423 ac *codd.*, nec *fort. schol.*⁶ | exclamare *codd.*, expatrare *Marzullo 1983* 428 rapidam *RAU*¹, rabidam *cett.* 429 et loto terram *PR*^{Arov.}, et terram loto *O*, et terramque luto *FH*²*Z*, et terram luto Φ 430 aurata *PR*, aut lata Φ , aut lota *K*¹*O*

A difficulty arises in lines 422–423, particularly with the word *crista*. It normally denotes the crest of a cock or other birds (also snakes); frequently the crest of a helmet; sometimes the ridge of a mountain; more rarely the crest of certain animals (dolphin, whale, crocodile).⁷ Notably, unlike Greek λόφος, it is never used of a human being⁸ and refers not to a mane (*iuba*) but to something rather hard and longitudinal.⁹

⁶ 1. *non cogit* [*co*<*e*>*git* Wessner] *exclamare, quod ecerit* [*ferierit* Barth, probante Wessner, *fecerit* alii, *iecerit* Marzullo 1983, 263 n. 17]; 2. *illa non exclamat, sed patienter tolerat*. Wessner 1931, 261 may well be right that the scholiast read *nec summum*...; however, the sense of the comment is not quite clear, and its text may be corrupt.

⁷ See *ThLL* IV. 1209. 70–77.

⁸ Cf. *Il.* 10. 573 κνήμας τε ἰδὲ λόφον ἀμφὶ τε μηρούς.

⁹ *Lucr.* 5. 1315 *terrificas capitum quatientes undique cristas* (of lions?) is the only possible exception, but Deuffert 2018, 356; 1996, 203–205, with lit., argues for its athetization as an interpolation from 2. 632 *t. c. q. numine cristas* (of the Curetes' helmets). Housman 1972, 435–436 (= 1897, 242–243) rightly dismisses Munro's idea of artificial crests (Munro ⁴1886, II, 346, quoting *Liv.* 37. 40. 4, of elephants); I suspect that *quatientes cristas* is construed with *turmas* in v. 1314, with *turmae* referring to infantry. In *Mart. Cap.* 2. 197 (*nunc draconis facies, nunc rictus leonis, nunc cristae cum aprugnis dentibus*), pace Meurig Davies 1949, 75, the word refers to boars, not lions. The meaning of *cristae* in *Sidon.* 5. 242 *pro barba tenues perarantur pectine cristae* (of the Franks, usually taken to mean 'moustaches') remains uncertain to me.

From the *scholia recentiora* on,¹⁰ scholars have unanimously adopted an explicitly obscene interpretation of these lines. *Crista* is taken as an occasional metaphor for the clitoris,¹¹ less often as denoting the labia¹² or pubic hair¹³ (the latter being unlikely, since *crista* is not applied to human hair or even to an animal's mane), and, evasively, female pudenda as a whole.¹⁴

The passage is thus read as describing the masseur's manual stimulation of the woman's genitals, with *callidus* meaning that he knows what his mistress desires and readily obliges her.

In v. 123 *summum femur* is metonymically understood as a groin region, and the following explanations have been proposed for *exclamare*:¹⁵

1) as a sound produced by a slap of the hand. A parallel is drawn with Seneca, *Epist.* 56. 1, where among the sounds heard from the bath he mentions a slap delivered to the shoulders, varying depending on whether the hand strikes flat or with the hollow of the palm.¹⁶ The parallel is apt, but a slap on the pubic region, the genitals, or even the inner thighs closer to the groin would not be as loud as a slap on the posterior part of the thighs nearer the buttocks;

2) as a loud smacking or popping of the vulva during sexual intercourse or digital penetration. The scholars refer to Mart. 7. 18 (8 *cunni garrulitate*, 11 *poppysmata cunni*, 13 *clamoso* <...> *cunno*).¹⁷ However, *summum femur*, even if understood metonymically, is still far from the *cunnius* itself, and *exclamare* seems too strong a word for such a sound.

¹⁰ Gallo–Grazzini 2021, 277; Grazzini 2011, 402.

¹¹ Grangaeus in Casaubon 1695, 167; Ruperti 1820, 332; Knoche 1951, 73; Adams 1982, 98; Watson–Watson 2014, 215; Dimatteo 2023, 513 n. 115.

¹² H. Valesius in Achaintre 1810, II, 168; Richlin 1986, 65.

¹³ *Schol. rec.* (Grazzini 2011, 402); Heinrich 1839, 259; Courtney 2013, 275 [1980]. Rudd[–Barr] 1991, 52; Adamietz 1993, 180, and Lorenz 2017, 219 “Helmbusch”.

¹⁴ *OLD* s.v. “(app.) the mons veneris”; *ThLL* IV. 1210. 61 s.v. “de parte muliebri”.

¹⁵ Adamietz 1993, 368 n. 180 maintains that the woman herself cries out; yet, “to make her thigh (or groin) cry” is a very odd way of saying that she cries when her thigh (or groin) is being massaged.

¹⁶ ...*audio crepitum illisae manus umeris, quae prout plana pervenit aut concava, ita sonum mutat.*

¹⁷ Grangaeus in Casaubon 1695, 167; H. Valesius in Achaintre 1810, II, 168; Watson–Watson 2014, 215.

In Martial, the accent lies on the woman being silent, so the only sound she makes appears loud – and the organ ‘garrulous’ – by contrast.

B. Marzullo emended *exclamare* to *expatrare*.¹⁸

The generally accepted interpretation outlined above is open to several serious objections.

To begin with, this situation, if not inconceivable, is at least surprising: the woman is accompanied to the baths by numerous attendants (419 *castra moveri*, 420 *magno <...> tumultu*), and it is far from obvious that the massage could afford sufficient privacy for such licentiousness.¹⁹

More importantly, the description of the woman’s habits and behavior in v. 418–433 – strenuous exercises with weights, drinking, and vomiting enormous quantities of wine – underscores her masculinity and coarse, ‘manly’ disposition. This goes beyond any doubt if one considers Martial’s epigram, which exhibits a striking structural parallel to our passage (7. 67. 4–12):²⁰

harpasto quoque subligata ludit
 et flavescit haphe, gravesque draucis 5
 halteras facili rotat lacerto,
 et putri lutulenta de palaestra
 uncti verberere vapulat magistri:

¹⁸ Marzullo 1983, 263–264. Yet *patrare*, in its obscene sense, refers to male orgasm. The only exception is Vindicianus (p. 445 Rose), who applies it to ‘female testicles’ (i.e. the ovaries), as producing ‘female semen’. To posit *expatrare* in this already singular sense and form, together with the dubious metonymy *femur* = ‘female pudenda’, is highly implausible.

¹⁹ Courtney ²2013, 274–275 quotes Clem. *Paed.* 3. 5. 32 δούλοις ἀποδύονται γυμναί καὶ ἀνατρίβονται ὑπ’ αὐτῶν, ἐξουσίαν δοῦσαι τῷ κατεπτηχότι τῆς ἐπιθυμίας τὸ ἀδεῆς τῆς ψηλαφήσεως. However, the passage does not prove that sexual misconduct might take place during the massage itself; it merely suggests that slave masseurs might find it difficult to maintain chastity of thought.

²⁰ A close parallel may also be seen in Sen. *Epist.* 95. 20–21, where he complains that women have begun to suffer from hair loss and gout because, contrary to their nature, they compete with men in late banquets, physical exercise, and drinking, and empty their stomachs on a par with them (*non minus pervigilant, non minus potant, et oleo et mero viros provocant; aequae invitis ingesta visceribus per os reddunt et vinum omne vomitu remetiuntur*). Cf. n. 4 above.

nec cenat prius aut recumbit ante
 quam septem vomuit meros deunces; 10
 ad quos fas sibi tunc putat redire,
 cum coloephia sedecim comedit.

Unlike Martial, Juvenal does not speak here of the woman's 'masculine' sexual orientation, yet such intimate services on the part of the masseur would plainly disrupt the coherence of her portrayal as a mannish woman, a virago. In general, accusations of licentiousness may be inserted into descriptions of other improper passions; here, however, the point is that she behaves in every respect like a sturdy male, whereas submitting to the masseurs' caresses would reveal a certain degree of femininity.

Further, in Martial's text, it is aggressive massage that is mentioned immediately after exercise with weights and before heavy drinking and vomiting prior to the dinner (v. 8 *uncti verbere vapulat magistri*). It is therefore natural to expect the same here, all the more so as *impressit* in this context carries more athletic than erotic or caressing connotations.

Finally, v. 423, as has already been noted, is difficult to interpret in an obscene sense and is far more readily understood as referring to a slapping strike on the posterior surface of the upper thigh – the woman lying prone – for purely massage purposes. If this is the case, then *cristae digitos impressit* in v. 422 makes more sense when taken in the same vein, rather than genital caressing.

In view of these considerations, it is preferable to reject the obscene understanding of *crista* and to interpret *digitos impressit* as describing vigorous athletic massage.

I propose to understand *crista* as a metaphorical reference to the muscular nape characteristic of athletes.²¹ The basis for this metaphor may lie in the use of *crista* with reference to dolphins, whales, and crocodiles (*ThLL* IV. 1209. 70–77): since the woman is lying prone, such a metaphor, though unparalleled, is at least conceivable.

The nape of the neck and the upper posterior thigh are natural targets of post-exercise massage, since both regions contain major

²¹ Cf., e.g., Mart. 14. 48. 2 *grandia qui vano colla labore facit*; Iuv. 3. 88; Sen. *Epist.* 15. 2; Philostr. *Vit. Apoll.* 6. 30. 2; *Heroic.* 49. 3; *Imag.* 2. 21. 4 ...καὶ ὁ αὐχὴν ἐπέζευκται τοῖς ὄμοις, ὧν τὸ πολὺ ἐπὶ τὸν αὐχένα ἦκει.

muscle groups that are particularly prone to tension after intense physical exertion. This interpretation also preserves the structural parallel with Mart. 7. 67.

The plausibility of such a metaphor is further supported by the comparison with the *crista* of prominent cervical vertebrae in physiognomic texts:

Scr. physiogn. I. 368 Foerster: (Adamant.) τραχὺς ἀρχὴν ὤσπερ λοφιά ἀμαθοῦς σὺν ὕβρει. / (Ps.-Polemon) τραχὺς ἀρχὴν ὤσπερ λοφιά ἀμαθῆ σὺν ὕβρει τὸν ἔχοντα μαρτυρεῖ.

Ibid. II. 75: *aspera cervix tamquam cristata non solum indocilem, sed etiam insolentem declarat.*

eaque cristata (sic André) vel eamque cristatam dicunt codd., tamquam cristata Foerster

The last argument, of course, is only indirect, since we are most likely dealing with a late-antique Latin translation of a Greek text, and it is not muscles but the protruding vertebrae that are compared to a *crista*. Nevertheless, it illustrates a possible direction for the metaphor, and original metaphors are not uncommon in Juvenal. In any case, there are hardly any stronger arguments in favor of interpreting *crista* as referring to the female pudenda.

The structural parallel with Mart. 7. 67, together with the general requirements of the context, suggest that v. 422–423 describe not a manual stimulation of the woman's genitals, but a vigorous athletic massage.

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Crista in Iuv. 6. 422 does not mean ‘clitoris’, ‘labia’, or ‘pubic hair’; and v. 422–423 do not imply manual stimulation of the female genitals: (1) the woman is described as mannish, and this would undermine her characterization; (2) in a close parallel at Mart. 7. 67, a vigorous massage is mentioned after physical exercises and before drinking and vomiting (v. 8); (3) v. 423 resists an obscene interpretation and suggests slapping as part of the massage (cf. Sen. *Epist.* 56. 1). *Crista* is best taken as a metaphor for a muscular nape: cf. *ThLL* IV. 1209. 70–77 s.v. (crests of dolphins, whales, and crocodiles) and Scr. physiogn. II. 75 Foerster (of prominent vertebrae): *aspera cervix tamquam cristata*; I. 368 τραχὺς ἀρχὴν ὅσπερ λοφία.

Crista у Ювенала (VI, 422) не означает ‘клитор’, ‘половые губы’ или ‘волосы на лобке’, и в ст. 422–423 не говорится о стимулировании гениталий: (1) это плохо согласуется с тем, что поведение героини описывается как ‘мужланское’; (2) в близкой параллели из Марциала (VII, 67) после физических упражнений и перед поглощением и выблевыванием вина упоминается агрессивный массаж (ст. 8); (3) ст. 423 трудно понять в obscene смысле и легко – как указание на шлепающий удар в процессе массажа (ср. Sen. *Epist.* 56. 1). *Crista* метафорически указывает на мускулистый загривок: ср. *ThLL* IV. 1209. 70–77 s.v. (гребни дельфинов, китов и крокодилов) и Scr. physiogn. II, 75 Foerster (о выдающихся шейных позвонках): *aspera cervix tamquam cristata*; I, 368 τραχὺς ἀρχὴν ὅσπερ λοφία.

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