

# Notes on the Erotic Art of Rufinus

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## I. *Εὐρώτας*

**F**IRST A POEM which has been quite heroically misunderstood, Rufinus XXI (*Anth.Pal.* 5.60):

παρθένος ἀργυρόπεζος ἐλούετο, χρύσεια μαζῶν  
χρωτὶ γαλακτοπαγεῖ μῆλα διαινομένη·  
πυγαὶ δ' ἀλλήλαις περιηγέες εἰλίσσοντο  
ὔδατος ὑγροτέρῳ χρωτὶ σαλευόμεναι  
τὸν δ' ὑπεροιδάινοντα κατέσκεπε πεπταμένη χεῖρ  
οὐχ ὄλον Εὐρώταν ἀλλ' ὅσον ἠδύνατο.

A girl bathing naked in an erotic posture covers with her outspread hand the Eurotas, or as much of it as she can. “The meaning is obvious but the expression is unintelligible,” remarks Page,<sup>1</sup> like his predecessors (among them the compilers of the Suda and Eustathius) taking *Εὐρώτας* to mean, not the famous Spartan river, but, astonishingly enough, the female private parts. Liddell-Scott-Jones have a special rubric (II) based on this passage alone: “*pudenda muliebria*, with allusion to *εὐρύς*.” Now all languages have any number of fanciful synonyms and euphemisms for sexual parts and practices, and, as Jeffrey Henderson has recently illustrated in abundance, the Greeks were no exception.<sup>2</sup> It is not inconceivable that, for reasons now irrecoverable, *Εὐρώτας* was so used, nor perhaps can we exclude completely the possibility that it is a corruption of some rare word beginning *εὐρυ-*. But what sort of sense would this make in the context of the poem as a whole?

(1) If *Εὐρώταν* in line 6 actually means vagina, then the present participle *ὑπεροιδάινοντα*, ‘swelling’, in 5 would imply that the girl was becoming sexually aroused. Yet there is nothing in the poem to indicate why, while at her toilet, she should become so aroused. (2) *παρθένος* in 1, while not necessarily certifying her *virgo intacta*,

<sup>1</sup> D. L. Page, *The Epigrams of Rufinus* (Cambridge 1978) 92. The idea has been further elaborated now by B. Baldwin, *JHS* 100 (1980) 182–84.

<sup>2</sup> *The Maculate Muse* (New Haven 1975), esp. 147–48 for examples from comedy of proper names used for the female organs.

in the absence of any contrary indication leads us to expect chaste rather than unchaste behaviour on this occasion. (3) If she was as unchaste as (*e.g.*) Jacobs supposed, her vagina swollen “a nimia Veneris usu,” why would she modestly cover rather than brazenly flaunt herself? (4) The moment we drop imprecise euphemisms, it will become clear that, while *ὑπεροιδαίνοντα* might without absurdity be referred to the vagina, it is the pubic area above and in front of the vaginal opening that a modest girl might cover with her hand. How and why could this be said to swell? Incidentally, the verb is not, as Page states, found “only here”: Lampe’s *Patristic Lexicon s.v.* quotes examples from Gregory of Nyssa in the sense ‘swell excessively’, ‘swell over’, thus accentuating our problem. (5) The phrase *οὐχ ὄλον . . . ἀλλ’ ὅσον ἠδύνατο* clearly implies that the girl’s hand was not nearly big enough to cover fully what she was trying to cover. Did Rufinus really mean us to picture a girl with a massive, ‘swelling’ bush of pubic hair? (6) While there is nothing implausible in itself in the picture of a nude girl who was disturbed and covered herself in embarrassment, there is no hint in the rest of the poem of any passer-by or peeping Tom to cause her to act so.

The solution is very simple. No passer-by, no sudden fit of modesty, and no obscene reference in *Εὐρώταν*. We have only to form a clearer picture of the scene Rufinus is trying to evoke. Instead of providing an explicit dramatic setting, he uses what Gordon Williams has called the “technique of gradual or partial revelation.”<sup>3</sup> Where is the girl bathing—at home, in a public bath, or out of doors somewhere? The first clue is given in line 4. The buttocks that wobble so alluringly do not toss about with flesh more fluid than water, but with flesh more fluid than *the* water, the water of the river she is bathing in. And line 6 identifies the river—the Eurotas, of course.

Page correctly notes that Rufinus’ *ὔδατος ὑγροτέρῳ χρωτί* recalls the conclusion of Philip of Thessalonica’s poem (*Anth.Pal.* 9.709) on a bronze statue of the Eurotas—*ἄ τις ὁ πείσας / χαλκὸν κομάζειν ὔδατος ὑγρότερον*—adding “it is presumably mere coincidence that the epigrams which have this phrase in common are both concerned with the river Eurotas.” Two cases of the figure one might put down to coincidence, but there is a third. Page’s own commentary on 9.709 quotes the elder Pliny’s description of Eutychides’ statue of the Eurotas (evidently the subject of Philip’s poem), *in*

<sup>3</sup> *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford 1968) 171.

*quo artem ipso amne liquidiores plurimi dixerunt.*<sup>4</sup> K. Jex-Blake and H. Rackam (LCL) render *liquidiores* ‘clearer’, but in the light of the Philippan parallel, ‘wetter’ or ‘more fluid’ would surely be preferable. It has long been noticed that there are numerous such parallels between Pliny’s descriptions of classical and Hellenistic works of art and Greek epigrammatic epigrams, by which he was obviously much influenced.<sup>5</sup> We cannot be certain that it was this very poem of Philip that Pliny had in mind, since the conceit of Eutychides’ Eurotas being “more fluid than the river itself” no doubt goes back long before Philip. But we can be fairly sure that Rufinus knew Philip. It is true that Page put Philip under Gaius and Rufinus as late as the fourth century, but I have elsewhere given reasons for believing that both are Neronian, with Philip’s *Garland* appearing first, soon after Nero’s accession.<sup>6</sup> We can scarcely doubt that it was in conscious allusion to Philip’s labored version of the conceit that Rufinus humorously transferred the phrase from a statue of the Eurotas to the swaying buttocks of a girl bathing in the Eurotas.

We may picture the scene as follows. This evidently rather well-endowed young Spartan woman bends over to wash her breasts in the water (lines 1–2), and the movement causes her buttocks to undulate in the way Rufinus so graphically describes. Faced with this double provocation, Eurotas, who like all Greek rivers is at once a body of water and a god with all too human reactions, is unable to restrain himself, and begins to ‘swell over’. *ὑπεροιδάινω* is an ideal word to suggest both aspects of the arousal of a river god (compare, e.g., *Aen.* 1.126, where *graviter commotus* refers both to Neptune’s anger and to the storm that is its cause). The girl, realizing the effect she is having, does what she can to stop the process. In the circumstances it cannot be a question of the usual gesture of modesty; it is the movement of buttocks and breasts that is causing the trouble. So she spreads her hands out horizontally as wide as possible (*πεπταμένη χεῖρ*) to block off as much of the river’s view of her as she can, *ὄσον ἠδύνατο. κατέσκεπε* means not ‘protect’ or ‘cover’ (as Page and his predecessors took it) but ‘ward

<sup>4</sup> Pliny *HN* 34.78; A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page, *The Greek Anthology: the Garland of Philip II* (Cambridge 1968) 364. For information on Eutychides, I am grateful to Bettina Bergmann.

<sup>5</sup> There is a useful list of Plinian passages with epigrammatic parallels in K. Jex-Blake and E. Sellers, *The Elder Pliny’s Chapters on the History of Art* (London 1896) lxxviii–lxxiii.

<sup>6</sup> “The *Garland of Philip*,” *GRBS* 21 (1980) 43–62, and “Strato and Rufinus,” *CQ* 75 (1981).

off' (a meaning found for the uncompounded byform *σκεπάζω*, *Anacreont.* 17.9).

The signposts were clearer for the ancient reader. Not only was Rufinus prompting him both with verbal echo and with the mention of the Eurotas to recall Philip's poem on Eutyichides' Eurotas. That in turn would have called to his mind the statue itself. For Eutyichides was famous for his river gods, the best-known being his Tyche of Antioch and Orontes group, made to commemorate the foundation of Antioch *ca* 300 B.C. The bronze original is lost, of course, but its general appearance is well known from the large number of copies and imitations:<sup>7</sup> a fine marble copy in the Vatican, many silver and bronze statuettes, gems, numerous Antiochene coins, and imitations on the coinage of many other eastern cities. Orontes is represented as a young man swimming past a rock on which Antioch sits, a Tyche with turreted crown; as he swims Orontes looks back and up at Antioch, in admiration and amazement at the "new and imposing figure enthroned on its banks."<sup>8</sup> We know much less of Eutyichides' Eurotas, though *ἀμφινέενυκεν*, 'nods from side to side', in line 3 of Philip's description certainly implies that he too was shown as a swimmer.

In earlier art a river god had been shown as a man-headed bull, as a man with bull horns, or as a reclining figure with cornucopia.<sup>9</sup> One whose mental picture of the Eurotas was of a swimming youth, perhaps even (like the Orontes) looking up at a female figure, would have experienced no difficulty with Rufinus' poem. It might be added that some of the cruder versions of the Antioch group (*e.g.*, those on coins, or the Tyches of Dura and Palmyra) simply show a woman with a swimming man's head positioned awkwardly at, beneath, or even between her legs, thus positively encouraging obscene interpretations in the more frivolous-minded. Rufinus XXI is less an erotic poem proper than one of those epideictic conceits so beloved of the epigrammatists of the first century.<sup>10</sup> It confounded its critics by being sillier than they expected.

One final textual point. Rufinus has a tendency to "apparently insensitive repetition,"<sup>11</sup> and if the sense and syntax of line 2 were above suspicion, no one would be very worried about the repeated

<sup>7</sup> Listed and illustrated by Tobias Dohrn, *Die Tyche von Antioch* (Berlin 1960).

<sup>8</sup> T. B. L. Webster, *Hellenistic Poetry and Art* (London 1964) 181.

<sup>9</sup> For illustrations see R. M. Gais, *AJA* 82 (1978) 355f.

<sup>10</sup> Well characterized by P. Laurens, "Martial et l'épigramme grecque du I<sup>er</sup> siècle après J.-C.," *REL* 43 (1965) 322–23.

<sup>11</sup> Page (*supra* n.1) 5, quoting examples.

*χρωτί* in 2 and 4. “*arcte cum χρύσεια iungenda*, said Jacobs, and indeed there is no other construction for the dative. *χρύσεια* means in effect bright . . .” (Page on line 2). That is to say: “washing the apples of her breasts, bright with milky white flesh.” Perhaps, though while breasts might appropriately be called either white or bright, apples are more golden than bright and certainly not white. Better, write *χειρί* for (the first) *χρωτί*: “washing the golden apples of her breasts with milky white hand.” This (1) eliminates the repetition; (2) simplifies the syntax; (3) distributes the colours more appropriately; and (4) gives a clearer picture of what the girl is doing. And with the sequence silver feet, golden breasts, and white hand compare the even longer sequence of contrasting colours for different parts of the body in Rufinus XIX (*Anth.Pal.* 5.48): golden eyes, glass-like cheeks, red mouth, marble neck, gleaming breasts, and (again) silver feet. As for the displacement of *χειρί* by the *χρωτί* of line 4, S. Timpanaro has recently observed that “the majority of errors by assimilation in Greek and Latin codices are ‘regressive’ . . . rather than ‘progressive’ . . . the writer is preoccupied with what he is about . . . to write, and it is this preoccupation which gives rise to the mistaken anticipation.”<sup>12</sup>

## II. Κόνδαξ

Rufinus XXII (*Anth.Pal.* 5.61) is another poem that has been suspected of being more obscene and less subtle than it is:

τῆ κυανοβλεφάρῳ παίζων κόνδακα Φιλίππη  
 ἐξ αὐτῆς κραδίης ἠδὲ γελᾶν ἐπόουν  
 “δώδεκά σοι βέβληκα, καὶ αὔριον ἄλλα βαλῶ σοι  
 ἢ πλέον ἢ ἐπάλιν δώδεκ’ ἐπιστάμενος.”  
 εἶπα, κελευομένη <δ’> ἦλθεν· γελάσας δὲ πρὸς αὐτήν  
 “εἶθε σε καὶ νύκτωρ ἐγρομένην ἐκάλουν.”

The point of the epigram was defined correctly by Hecker: *gloriatur se, cum iam duodecies cum Philippa Veneri operatus esset, rursus postero die eundem numerum expleturum, sed quum haec postero die venisset, se vel eadem nocte illud facere potuisse dixit; i.e.* after prodigious feats today he promises the same tomorrow; when she comes the next day, he says that he regrets the waste of time in the interval (Page, p. 92).

<sup>12</sup> *The Freudian Slip: Psychoanalysis and Textual Criticism* (London 1976) 97.

This crude, feeble, and implausible scenario (which I shall discuss no further) fails to explain why Philippa evidently found what Rufinus said to her in lines 3–4 so funny. Now if he had just made love to her twelve times in a row, she might have been experiencing a variety of reactions, from delight and anticipation to dismay and exhaustion—but scarcely amusement.

*κόνδαξ* was some sort of game of chance.<sup>13</sup> Whatever its exact significance, *βάλλω* (twice in line 3) must be a term appropriate to this game (it is, for example, a dicing term, LSJ *s.v.* II.7) that also lends itself to sexual double entendre,<sup>14</sup> like (*e.g.*) ‘have’ in English: “I’ve had you twelve times and tomorrow I’ll have you another twelve times, or more, since I know how.” But the double entendre could hardly have provoked such merriment unless the relationship between Rufinus (so to style the subject of the poem, without prejudging its autobiographical character) and Philippa had (so far) been entirely *innocent*.

There is more to the poem than a simple double entendre, however. The fact that Philippa laughs so very heartily (*ἐξ αὐτῆς κραδίης ἡδὺ γελᾶν*) at Rufinus’ joke is clearly significant. For although it is innocent of explicit sexual reference, it is a sexual overture nonetheless, especially in its pointed final touch, *ἐπιστάμενος*. Note that we are not told simply that Philippa laughed, but that Rufinus *made* her laugh (*γελᾶν ἐπόουν*), implying an element of deliberate calculation. Philippa’s response was not such as to discourage in a situation where not to discourage is to encourage. And from the last couplet we learn that she duly turns up for the return match promised for the next day (this much is clear, whether or not with Page we print Ludwich’s *δ’* and *εἶπα* for P’s *εἶτα*), ostensibly to play *κόνδαξ* again, though perhaps with more than half a suspicion that one game will turn into another. At this point Rufinus repeats his joke, only this time in a more explicit form (accepting Stadtmueller’s *ἐγρομένην* for P’s *ἐρχομένην*): “I wish I had woken you up in the night and invited you.” Once more ostensibly to play *κόνδαξ*; *γελάσας* in line 5 guarantees that 6 is still operating at the level of double entendre, though of course the reference to a nighttime invitation<sup>15</sup> leaves little doubt which element is uppermost in

<sup>13</sup> See the texts quoted by Page (*supra* n.1) 92f, though correct his reference to *Cod.Iust.* to 3.43.1.

<sup>14</sup> For *-βάλλειν* compounds used of sexual intercourse see Henderson (*supra* n.2) 121, 170.

<sup>15</sup> For this motif see A. H. Griffiths, *BICS* 17 (1970) 35f.

Rufinus' mind. If Philippa stays after this, she has only herself to blame if she does not like the game they end up playing.

A neat parallel is provided by Ps.-Lucian, *Asinus* 6. The narrator Lucius comes across the maid Palaestra in the kitchen and makes suggestive remarks ("happy is the man who dips his fingers in your pot," to overtranslate the ambiguous middle *ἐνεβάψατο*). She replies, in language no less heavy with double entendre, that she is not just a good cook but a 'man cook': she "knows how to kill a man, skin him, and cut him up" (*σφάττειν καὶ δέρειν καὶ κατακόπτειν*). Lucius invites her to try these skills out on him, emphatically repeating the word in her reply with the most explicitly obscene reference, *δέρειν*, 'skin', 'flay', = Latin *glubere* = 'masturbate':<sup>16</sup> *καὶ με ἤδη ἀπεσφαγμένον λαβοῦσα δειρε...* "At this," the narrator continues, "she gave a loud and delightful laugh, and thereafter she was mine."

A slightly different example is provided by Ovid, *Amores* 3.2. 81ff. Throughout the poem Ovid has been operating on the assumption that if his new girl's favorite charioteer wins, he will win her. The most explicit formulation comes at the very end:

*"sunt dominae rata vota meae, mea vota supersunt;  
ille tenet palmam; palma petenda mea est."  
risit, et argutis quiddam promisit ocellis.  
"hoc satis hic; alio cetera redde loco."*

In all three cases the man makes his pitch through a double entendre of some sort and the girl signals her encouragement by a laugh, in two cases an excessive or immodest laugh. If the girl misses the message or wishes to discourage, neither party need be embarrassed: it is 'only a joke'. Rufinus and Lucius make their intentions a little clearer—though still not explicit—by following up with another, less subtle double entendre. It is a familiar enough game, one that has changed not a jot down the centuries.

It might be added that Ovid recommended both sexes to make use of the possibilities offered by dicing and board games (*Ars Am.* 2.203–08, 3.353–68). Philippa knew that *turpe est nescire puellam | ludere: ludendo saepe paratus amor* (3.367–68). The metaphorical potential of the similarities between 'bedgames and

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Henderson (*supra* n.2) 133; B. Arkins and H. D. Jocelyn, *Liverpool Classical Monthly* 4 (1979) 85–91.

boardgames' can be illustrated from many literatures.<sup>17</sup> It is well known that the Romans called the best throw at dice *Venus*; Propertius represents himself aiming for it as an augury of his prospects in love.<sup>18</sup> But it is only recently that Calvert Watkins has demonstrated the sexual connotations of one of the lower throws, the *suppus*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See H. J. R. Murray, *A History of Chess* (Oxford 1913) 736–39; Norman Knight and Will Guy, *King, Queen, and Knight: a Chess Anthology* (London 1975) 153–64.

<sup>18</sup> 4.8.45; cf. Ps.-Lucian *Amores* 16, and D. R. Shackleton-Bailey, *Propertiana* (Cambridge 1956) 255f.

<sup>19</sup> *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 1 (1973) 394–99.