

ATTIS' GROIN WEIGHTS  
(CATULLUS 63.5)

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Super alta vectus Attis celeri rate maria  
Phrygium ut nemus citato cupide pede tetigit  
adiitque opaca silvis redimita loca deae,  
stimulatus ibi furenti rabie, vagus animis,  
devolsit ili acuto sibi pondera silice . . . <sup>1</sup>  
(Catull. 63.1–5)

**B**Y THE END OF THE poem's fifth verse the deed is done, and neither character nor poet has wasted a moment in getting to it or lingering over it. Modern readers, at least the more squeamish among us, are perhaps grateful to Catullus for both the narrative velocity and the dictional vagueness with which he recounts Attis' self-castration. And commentators, whether actively loath to tarry or simply swept along in the general haste, have for their part been universally content to take the words *ili* . . . *pondera* in this line as a mere periphrasis for Attis' testicles, a fairly straightforward and prosaic one at that.<sup>2</sup> I wish to suggest that there may be more meaning to the phrase than has been seen, and more poetry as well.

Periphrastic it certainly is: all the Latin *nomina propria* for the anatomical part(s) in question would have been dictionally inappropriate in the present context. *Colei*, roughly equivalent in tone to its Romance derivatives, was clearly ruled out: the *carmina maiora*, even the bawdy Poem 67, rigorously eschew all primary obscenity.<sup>3</sup> The colloquial *testes* (literally "witnesses"), still somewhat risqué, was low in register and, what is worse, open to every sort of comedic gaffe and pun. Finally, *testiculi*, though it appears later in satire, seems to have had something of the clinical tone of its English

1. Citations of Catullus are from R. A. B. Mynors' 1958 Oxford edition.

2. W. Kroll (Stuttgart, 1959) glosses "die *testes* werden umschreiben durch *pondera*," and then cites Petron. 92.9 and Mart. 7.35.4 (see below, n. 9), both featuring *pundus* in the singular referring to the penis rather than the testicles. C. J. Fordyce (Oxford, 1961) prints the lines in his text but excludes them from comment. K. Quinn (London, 1970) discusses the Renaissance emendation *pondera* but does not translate the phrase. D. F. S. Thomson (Toronto, 1997) advises us to "translate as if *pondera* = *testiculos*" and cites Ov. *Fast.* 4.241 (see text to n. 11). Also see J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore, 1982), 51: "*ilei pondera* is a circumlocution = 'testicles,'" and later on the same page, "*pondera* = testicles."

3. On *colei*, see Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (n. 2 above), 66. Poem 67 is carefully euphemistic: note for example *minxerit* (67.30) instead of *futuerit*; *sicula* (67.21) in place of the metrically equivalent, and very Catullan, *mentula*.

derivative.<sup>4</sup> In any event, Catullus uses none of these three words anywhere in his poetry. The word he does use here is found twice elsewhere in the Catullan corpus, both times in the plural: *ilia* ("groin, flanks"). The contexts of those appearances are invective, and the sets of *ilia* in both cases are envisaged as incapacitated, literally "burst," as a result of sexual activity: Lesbia, in Catullus' farewell malediction, is *ilia rumpens* (11.20), while Gellius' siesta-time activities with a certain Victor are made evident by the former's whitened lips and the latter's *rupta . . . ilia* (80.7–8). A literary translator rendering these two passages might understandably, and aptly enough for that purpose, have resort to the colloquial English "ball-busting" and "busted balls" for the two phrases respectively, but what Catullus meant by broken *ilia* was probably something closer to what he ascribes elsewhere to a young man whose vigorous lovemaking has wrecked his bed and wobbled it out into the center of the bedroom: *latera ecfututa* ("fucked-out flanks," 6.13).<sup>5</sup> *Ilia* seems, by its usage in other authors, to refer to the region stretching from the lower abdomen to the pubes.<sup>6</sup> It is sometimes used more generally to mean simply "guts," more often than not in the case of animals.<sup>7</sup> The noun is heteroclite; its unattested nominative singular should be either *ile* or *ilium*. Commentators have all taken *ili* here as it was taken by the emender who proposed it, namely as a genitive singular from the latter form ("the weights of his groin"), though it could also possibly be an ablative of separation ("he tore the weights *off* his groin") from the former.<sup>8</sup>

As for the other member of the phrase, Latin authors do refer elsewhere to a "weight" between a male pair of legs, but only in the singular, and usually in the context of measuring, or at least commenting upon, the penile endowment.<sup>9</sup> An epigram of Martial describes a certain Marulla's practice of "weighing" a penis with her hand before and after copulation and announcing, to the sixth of an ounce, the two weights and the diminution from the one to the other. *Non ergo est manus ista*, Martial concludes, *sed statera* (10.55.7). Precisely the same image is illustrated, literally this time, in a Pompeian fresco from the house of the Vettii: a Priapic figure is shown placing his penis upon the platter (*statera*) of a hand-held scale.<sup>10</sup> The Roman man's penis was evaluated for the most part not in inches but in ounces, like a sausage. Catullus' text, however, has no interest in the dimension of any part of Attis' endowment, and again, only Catullus uses the plural *pondera* to refer to a pair of testicles as they are being cut from the groin. There is always the possibility of a poetic plural for singular, but I have

4. Ovid, for example, plays on the two senses of *testes* at *Am.* 3.3.19: *sine pondere testes*. On *testes* and *testiculi*, see Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 66–68.

5. P. Whigham, *The Poems of Catullus* (London, 1966), conversely, renders with clinical precision: "guts" at Poem 11 and "thighs" at Poem 80.

6. *OLD*, s.v. *ilia*.

7. E.g., Hor. *Sat.* 2.8.30: *ingustata mihi porrexerat ilia rhombi*.

8. *ilei* is Bergk's emendation of a garbled text (*iletas*). Mynors regularizes to the form *ili*, as does Thomson, who takes it as a genitive singular from *ilium*.

9. E.g., Petron. 92.9: *habebat enim inguinum pondus tam grande, ut ipsum hominem laciniam fascini crederes*, also Mart. 7.35.4, *Priap.* 69.4 and, on the "lightness" of a eunuch's penis, Schol. Juv. 6.369. All cited by Adams, *Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 71.

10. Reproduced in J. R. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking* (Berkeley, 1998), 175, and M. Grant, *Erotic Art in Pompeii* (London, 1975), 53.

found no instance of it in the case of this word, and “weights” are after all not quite the same thing as “weight.”

When Ovid, in the *Fasti*, tells the same story as our text, he and his Attis clearly have Catullus in mind (4.237–42):

ille etiam saxo corpus laniavit acuto,  
 longaue in immundo pulvere tracta coma est.  
 voxque fuit “merui: meritas do sanguine poenas:  
 a, pereant partes quae nocuere mihi!  
 a, pereant!” dicebat adhuc: onus inguinis aufert,  
 nullaue sunt subito signa relicta viri.

Catullus’ *acuto* . . . *silice* (63.5) is explicitly recalled by Ovid’s *saxo* . . . *acuto* (237) and, more broadly, the Ovidian passage has all the look of a rhetorical and performative “outbidding” of its Catullan model. As Elaine Fantham has noted, verse 242 seems to suggest that in his florid enthusiasm, Ovid’s Attis has removed the penis along with the testicles.<sup>11</sup> If so, then Ovid has given us here a particularly outrageous instance of the “quintessentially Alexandrian” type of poetic reference known as “correction.”<sup>12</sup> And more to the point, the Ovidian Attis’ *onus inguinis* (241)—the entire apparatus of reproduction characterized as a single (onerous) weight—will mean something importantly different from the Catullan Attis’ *ili* . . . *pondera* (63.5).

The word *pondera*, in the plural, in addition to meaning “weights” in general, had a specialized technical meaning that nearly every ancient reader would have known, and the act of cutting the testicles and letting them fall to the ground closely resembles an act within that technical sphere. The warp threads of an ancient loom hung loose from a crossbeam at the top, steadied only by weights attached to their lower ends (probably two or three threads to each weight, to keep individual threads from unraveling). As the work progressed, the woven fabric was wound around the top crossbeam, which turned like a spool.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the work, the warp weights were hanging near the top of the loom, and though no ancient author describes it explicitly, there was only one efficient way to remove the warp weights from the finished fabric: a blade was drawn across the hanging threads, and the weights, still tied to the cut ends, dropped to the ground. Seneca, in a passage that describes the threading and preparation of a loom in precise detail and exact terminology, gives us assurance that the *nomen proprium* in Latin for these suspended warp weights was *pondera* (*Ep.* 90.20):

Posidonius . . . vult describere primum quemadmodum alia torqueantur fila, alia ex molli solutoque ducantur, deinde quemadmodum tela suspensis ponderibus rectum stamen extendat, quemadmodum subtemen insertum, quod duritiam utrimque conprimentis tramae remolliat, spatha coire cogatur et iungi . . .

11. E. Fantham, *Ovid: “Fasti” Book IV* (Cambridge, 1998), ad loc.

12. R. F. Thomas, “Virgil’s *Georgics* and the Art of Reference,” *HSCP* 90 (1986): 185: “Perhaps the quintessentially Alexandrian type of reference is what I would call **correction**” (emphasis in original).

13. For detailed description of the operation of the warp-weighted loom, together with illustrations, see E. Broudy, *The Book of Looms: A History of the Handloom from Ancient Times to the Present* (Hanover and London, 1979), 23–26.

If we allow this meaning of the word to be activated in Catullus' text, the phrase *ili . . . pondera* becomes not just a simple periphrasis, but rather a textbook example of a particular kind of misuse of language that is central to the act of poetic creation: metaphor. More precisely, it is what Aristotle calls τὸ ἀνάλογον, analogy. Metaphor by analogy, in Aristotle's famous example, is the version of the trope that remains truest to the word's meaning of "transference," of swapping B and D between A and C: the cup becomes "Dionysus' shield"; the shield, "Ares' cup."<sup>14</sup> It is precisely the exchange that brings out the analogy. In the present instance, testicles are to groin as *pondera* to warp threads. Likening testicles to weights on a thread was presumably a natural enough image in a culture where many if not most people (city dwellers included) can be expected to have observed farm or conveyance animals with a knowledgeable eye. The similitude is in any case attested in Lucilius, where a ram's endowment is praised with the observation that the low-hanging testicles appear to dangle from a single thread, while the penis is described as a massive burden, *onus* (Lucil. 534–36):

"ibat forte aries" inquit "iam quod genus! quantis  
testibus! vix uno filo hosce haerere putares,  
pellicula extrema exaptum pendere *onus* ingens."

It is worth noting as well that the fourth-century Christian apologist Arnobius, invoking the same moment in Attis' story, was impelled or emboldened to metaphorize it in a way similar to Catullus, though with a different point of comparison: *arboris, sub qua sibi Attis virum demessis genitalibus abstulit* (5.39). Attis' testicles are fruits this time, of the tree that is his groin. By including an actual tree in his sentence (a tree that the goddess was later to consecrate as a memory of Attis' grief), Arnobius both highlights the implicit metaphor and, like Catullus, calls vividly to mind a familiar and homely agrarian image: a scythe is drawn crosswise beneath the fertile branch, and the harvested fruits fall to the ground.

It is proposed, then, to read the weights suspended from Attis' groin as metaphoric loans from an upright loom. Is there any profit in the way of interpretive gain, or any corroborative evidence, that might persuade a reader of the poem to accept that loan? I offer three suggestions. The first of these has to do with the nature and operation of metaphor itself. Metaphor is a kind of mistake: a way of calling a thing something it isn't rather than what it is, and so telling us something new about what the thing is *like*. The trope's first motion is thus necessarily away from the thing under description rather than toward it. Metaphor starts by putting what the New Critics used to call "aesthetic distance" between perceiver and perceived. In Attis' case, the better term might be "anaesthetic distance." What would it feel like to be Attis in the fifth verse of Catullus' poem? Perhaps like nothing at all, at least for the duration of that verse. After the climactic cut, the poem continues as follows (63.6–18):

14. Arist. *Poet.* 1457b.

itaque ut relictā sensit sibi membra sine viro,  
 etiam recente terrae sola sanguine maculans,  
niveis citata cepit manibus leve tympanum,  
 tympanum tuum, Cybebe, tua, mater, initia,  
 quatiensque terga tauri teneris cava digitis  
 canere haec suis adorta est tremebunda comitibus.  
 “agite ite ad alta, Gallae, Cybeles nemora simul,  
 simul ite, Dindymenae dominae vaga pecora,  
 aliena quae petentes velut exules loca  
 sectam meam exsecutae duce me mihi comites  
 rapidum salum tulistis truculentaque pelagi,  
 et corpus evirastis Veneris nimio odio;  
 hilarate erae citatis erroribus animum.”

It is remarkable that the poem’s opening, for all its breakneck speed—five verses narrate the sailing journey, disembarkation, run through the woods, arrival at the grove, and self-castration—pauses at the sixth verse to mark Attis’ sense-awareness (*sensit*) of his new physical state as a discrete temporal event in that narrative chain. Remarkable, but physiologically quite accurate, and an effect evidently familiar to Catullus’ contemporary readers. At a certain point in his argument for a material soul made of atoms, Lucretius reminds his readers that warring charioteers sometimes lose an arm or other limb only to drive on, unable at first to feel the pain, while the severed member continues to quiver on the ground (Lucr. 3.642–47):

falciferos memorant currus abscidere membra  
 saepe ita de subito permixta caede calentis,  
 ut tremere in terra videatur ab artubus id quod  
 decidit abscisum, cum mens tamen atque hominis vis  
 mobilitate mali non quit sentire dolorem  
 et simul in pugnae studio quod dedita mens est

In that light, and given that the metaphor implied in the phrase is primarily a visual one (hanging testicles *look* like hanging warp weights), we are perhaps entitled to focalize the words *ili . . . pondera* on the character rather than the narrator, as though it were Attis himself who, in the slow-motion moment of perfect calm at the center of a traumatic event, silently remarked, with a certain bemusement, that what he had just seen looked like nothing so much as a pair of cut warp weights hitting the ground.

If Attis cutting his testicles feels like, or looks like, a weaver cutting warp weights, then a second suggestion flows fairly obviously in light of Graeco-Roman gender ideology. Weaving, like spinning, belonged to what Tibullus (2.1.63) called *labor femineus*. Diligent practice of the textile arts was of course emblematic of the Roman woman’s *pudicitia*: Lucretia is surprised *deditam lanae* (Livy 1.57.9) and so Collatinus wins the unlucky competition for possession of the best wife; a character in Terence’s *Heautontimoroumenos* breathes an exaggerated sigh of relief to learn that his intended has been spied within *textentem telam* (Ter. *Heaut.* 285). Many sepulchral inscriptions bear out the (at least ideological) verisimilitude of these literary

representations.<sup>15</sup> The textile arts constituted a sphere of women's activity from which men were to keep their distance. Cicero cites, as an example of the *bellus* witticism, a man's response to an accusation of effeminacy that took the form of a taunting, sarcastic invitation to pay a visit for a spinning bee: *quid tu, Egilia mea?* [the man's name was Egilius] *quando ad me venis cum tua colu et lana?* (Cic. *De Orat.* 2.277).<sup>16</sup> By the metaphoric image of warp weights, then, Attis' last act as a man is simultaneously configured as his first act as a "bastard" (*notha*, 63.27) woman. The liminal moment of the cut, we might say, belongs liminally to both gender roles; it "reads," sylleptically, in both contexts. By the operation of metaphor, Attis the man's self-castration and Attis the woman's cutting of warp threads occupy the same narrative instant.

Attis' performance up to and including the act of self-castration has consisted in purposive and directed action at full speed. After the cut, the "members without the man" (63.6) are subject instead to an "agitated" (*citata*, 63.8) and "tremulous" (*tremebunda*, 63.11) speed whose appearance coincides with the shift of Attis' name into the feminine gender. The symptoms of castration-as-feminization are thus inscribed on Attis' name, just as they are inscribed on the body: Attis now has hands as white as snow (63.8), delicate fingers (63.10), and, the next morning, lips like roses (63.74).<sup>17</sup> My final suggestion is that these and similar features of Catullus' poem belong to a set of specifically Graeco-Roman notions concerning physiology and gender, or rather, perhaps, a set of notions by which the relation of the two was constructed. Aristotle is for us a chief source for many of these notions (and incidentally the strongest piece of corroborating evidence for reading the Catullan metaphor proposed here), though Catullus is more likely to have imbibed them from what a Roman man of his class would have known of Hellenistic medicine, or simply by virtue of being Graeco-Roman (and so a "vernacular" Aristotelian), rather than from direct knowledge of the following passage from Aristotle's treatise *On the Generation of Animals* (787b–788a).<sup>18</sup>

All animals when castrated change over to the female state (εἰς τὸ θῆλυ μεταβάλλει), and as their sinewy strength is slackened at its source they emit a voice similar to that of females. This slackening may be illustrated in the following way. It is as though you were to stretch a cord and make it taut by hanging some weight on to it, just as women do who weave at the loom; they stretch the warp by hanging what they call "warp weights" on to it. This is the way in which the testes are attached to the seminal passages, which in their turn are attached to the blood vessel which has its starting point at

15. Perhaps best known is the second-century B.C.E. inscription from the grave of Claudia (CIL 6.15346), with its laconic ending: *domum servavit. lanam fecit. dixi. abi.*

16. Egilius' *bellus* response was as follows: "Non pol' inquit 'audeo, nam me ad famosas vetuit mater accedere.'" Compare also Laronia's comments on male spinners at Juv. 2.54–57.

17. For discussion of Roman gender constructions and Poem 63 see M. Skinner, "Ego Mulier: The Construction of Male Sexuality in Catullus," *Helios* 20, 2 (1993): 107–30 (revised and shortened in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. J. Hallett and M. Skinner [Princeton, 1997], 129–50).

18. On "vernacular" Aristotelianism as a theorizing of Graeco-Roman popular notions, see C. Gill, "The Emotions in Greco-Roman Philosophy," in *The Passions in Roman Thought and Literature*, ed. S. Braund and C. Gill (Cambridge, 1997), 7–8.

the heart near the part which sets the voice in movement. And so, as the seminal passages undergo a change at the approach of the age when they can secrete semen, this part undergoes a simultaneous change. And as this changes, so too does the voice—to a greater extent in males, but the same happens with females as well, though the change there is less obvious; and one result of this is that, as we say, the voice “is breaking” during the time that it is uneven. After that, it settles down into the deep or high pitch belonging to the age of life which is to succeed. If the testes are removed, the tautness of the passages is slackened, just as when the weight is removed from the cord or from the warp; and as this slackens, the source (or principle) which sets the voice in movement is correspondingly loosened. This then is the cause on account of which castrated animals change over to the female condition both as regards the voice and the rest of their form: it is because the principle from which the tautness of the body is derived is slackened.<sup>19</sup>

Where Latin would have said *pondus* and *pondera*, the more copious Greek lexicon allows Aristotle to distinguish between the general instance of a “weight” (τι βάρος, “something heavy”) at the end of a cord and the specific, technical instance of “what they call ‘warp weights’” (τὰς καλουμένας λαιᾶς) suspended from a set of warp threads (στήμονα). The likeness between warp weights and testicles, already drawn once earlier in the treatise (717a), appears here twice, first in the comparison of an intact male groin to the weights in suspension, and later in the comparison of castration to the removal of the weights from the warp. The broader subject of the passage’s context is the distinction between male and female voices, what Anne Carson has called “the gender of sound” in classical antiquity.<sup>20</sup> Conceptions about voice and gender similar to Aristotle’s seem to have motivated, for example, the physicians of the later empire who prescribed declamation practice for adult male patients as a way of restoring health and vigor by bringing the voice back to its low, “manly” pitch.<sup>21</sup>

It is tempting to posit direct reference in Catullus’ poem to the passage cited above, especially in light of the thematic similarities between Aristotle’s discussion of stages of growth and Attis’ second soliloquy, in which he reviews the stages or “shapes” of his own life (63.50–73). Tempting, but I think ultimately unnecessary. The similitude between warp weights and testicles, as I have suggested, was probably commonplace for an ancient reader or listener, just as was the connection between gender and vocal pitch. If that is so, then Catullus needed no more than the single word *pondera* to activate that similitude in the context of castration, just as he had no need, several verses later, to describe for his reader the timbre of Attis’ new voice.<sup>22</sup>

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19. A. L. Peck’s Loeb translation (Cambridge, Mass., 1943), slightly modified.

20. A. Carson, “The Gender of Sound,” in *Glass, Irony, and God* (New York, 1995), 119–42.

21. M. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Preservation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, 1995), 88–94.

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