

Sex on Capri*

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SUMMARY: This paper discusses words notoriously coined to convey the “dark pleasures” of Tiberius Caesar in his last years on Capri (27–37 c.e.). The *OLD* defines them thus: *sellarium* “A privy”; *sellarius* “A type of male prostitute”; *spintria* “A type of male prostitute.” These definitions are both wrong and misleading. *Sellaria* (*sic*) should be taken as a proper noun connoting “The Brothel”; *sellarius* does not exist; and *spintria* should be understood as “bracelet worker,” including both males and females. Real prostitution is not involved, but rather an extreme form of traditional elaborate private theatricals.

I.

TIBERIUS CAESAR DEVISED UNSPEAKABLE DEBAUCHERIES ON THE ISLAND of Capri during the last ten years of his life. Two paragraphs in Tacitus and Suetonius provide the details. First Tacitus:

Cn. Domitius et Camillus Scribonianus consulatum inierant, cum Caesar tramisso quod Capreas et Surrentum interfuit freto Campaniam praelegebat, ambiguus an urbem intraret, seu, quia contra destinaverat, speciem venturi simulans. et saepe in propinqua degressus, aditis iuxta Tiberim hortis, saxa rursum et solitudinem maris repetiit pudore scelerum et libidinum quibus adeo indomitis exarserat ut more regio pubem ingenuam stupris pollueret. nec formam tantum et decora corpora set in his modestiam pueritiam, in aliis imagines maiorum incitamentum cupidinis habebat. tuncque primum ignota antea vocabula reperta sunt sellariorum et spintriarum ex foeditate loci et multiplici patientia; praepositique servi qui conquirerent pertraherent, dona in promptos, minas adversum abnuentis, et si retinerent propinquos

* This paper has profited from the comments of Donna Hurley, Bob Kaster, Joshua Katz, Tony Woodman, and the anonymous referees.

aut parens, vim raptus suaque ipsi velut in captos exercebant. (*Ann.* 6.1, in the 1906 OCT of C. D. Fisher)

This is rendered into English as follows by Woodman 2004:

Cn. Domitius and Camillus Scribonianus had embarked on the consulship when Caesar, having crossed the strait which washes between Capri and Surrentum, was skirting Campania, in two minds whether to go into the City—or, because he had already decided otherwise, simulating a scene of impending arrival. And, having landed often in the neighborhood and approached the gardens by the Tiber, he retreated again to his rocks and the solitude of the sea, in shame at the crimes and unbridled lusts with which he was so inflamed that, in the manner of a king, he polluted freeborn youngsters in illicit sex. Nor was it only good looks and becoming bodies but in some cases boyish modesty and in others the images of their ancestors which acted as the incitement of his desire. And that was the first time that the previously unknown designations of “sellarii” and “spintriae” were devised, respectively from the foulness of their place and their multifarious passivity. And the slaves who were charged with the searching and bringing resorted to gifts for the ready, threats against the reluctant and, if a relative or parent held them back, violent seizure, as though their victims were captives.

Compare Suetonius on the same subject:

secessu vero Caprensi etiam sellaria excogitavit, sedem arcanarum libidinum, in quam undique conquisiti puellarum et exoletorum greges monstrosique concubitus repertores, quos spintrias appellabat, triplici serie conexi, in vicem incestarent coram ipso, ut aspectu deficientis libidines excitaret. cubacula plurifariam disposita tabellis ac sigillis lascivissimarum picturarum et figurarum adornavit librisque Elephantidis instruxit, ne cui in opera edenda exemplar impe[t]ratae schemae deesset. in silvis quoque ac nemoribus passim Venerios locos commentus est prost[r]antisque per antra et cavas rupes ex utriusque sexus pube Paniscorum et Nympharum habitu, quae palam iam et vulgo nomine insulae abutentes Caprineum dictitabant. (*Tib.* 43, in the 1908 Teubner of M. Ihm)

This has been rendered into English by D. W. Hurley, in her revision of the Loeb translation of J. C. Rolfe (1998 [1913]), which had left the passage in Latin:

On retiring to Capri he devised “holey places” as a site for his secret orgies; there select teams of girls and male prostitutes, inventors of deviant intercourse and dubbed analists, copulated before him in triple unions to excite his flagging passions. Its many bedrooms he furnished with the most salacious paintings and sculptures and stocked with the books of Elephantis, in case any performer should need an illustration of a prescribed position. Then in Capri’s woods

and groves he contrived a number of spots for sex where boys and girls got up as Pans and nymphs solicited outside grottoes and sheltered recesses; people openly called this “the old goat’s garden,” punning on the island’s name.

Over the centuries two previously unknown words, *sellarii* (or *sellaria*) and *spintriae*, coined it would seem by Tiberius himself, have provoked thrills of horror and forbidden delight. What do they mean?

Let us start with good modern translations of Tacitus’s *sellariorum et spintriarum ex foeditate loci et multiplici patientia*. Woodman leaves the two neologisms untranslated but remarks in a footnote that “[t]he former term is derived from *sellarium* = “privy” (see Suetonius, *Tiberius* 43. 1 “in his Capri retreat he even devised *sellaria* as the place for his arcane lusts”); the latter term is connected with the Greek word for catamite” (2004: 166n16). As to that, P. Willeumier in his 1975 *Budé* of Tacitus (apparently following H. Ailloud in his 1931 Suetonius *Budé*) notes, as do many others, that *spintria* seems to come from the Greek σφιγκτης = *cinaedus* (i.e., catamite).

Compare the clear version of Yardley 2008, likewise leaving the words in Latin, but understanding them somewhat more definitely: “Then two previously unknown terms were invented: *sellarii* and *spintriae*, named respectively from the foul locations where they operated and their wide range of pathic sexual activities” (184). A. Barrett’s note to the passage glosses, “*Sellarii* are men who haunt latrines (see Suetonius, *Tib.* 43); *spintriae* are young male prostitutes” (449).¹

Even more sharply defined, R. Martin, in his edition of *Annals* V and VI (2001): “And then were invented the hitherto unknown terms of ‘stoolmen’ and ‘squeezers’, derived from the foulness of the place and the multiple submissiveness” (41). His understanding of these precise terms is presented with his

¹ Older versions are along the same lines. J. Jackson’s 1937 *Loeb*: “And now were coined the names, hitherto unknown, of *sellarii* and *spintriae*, one drawn from the obscenity of a place, one from the versatility of the pathic” (155). D. Dudley’s New American Library version of 1966: “It was then that new names had to be found for perversions hitherto unknown—*sellarii* and *spintriae*, descriptions suited to their obscene postures and pathic complexity” (188). The loaded term “pathic” common to Yardley, Jackson, and Dudley is not in the Latin (Woodman is precise and correct; but Martin [below] uses the term *pathicus* in his note if not in his translation); nor is Dudley’s startling “perversions hitherto unknown” in the Latin—thus are legends started. Compare M. Grant’s “new names for types of perversions” in his 1989 revised Penguin (200). I emphasize that these are all serious translations. I ignore many others which are inaccurate, euphemistic, or intentionally ignorant. The only serious modern commentary, Koestermann 1965, says nothing about these words.

customary clarity: “from *sella*, a seat or stool, comes *sellarium*, a latrine; hence *sellarii* are male prostitutes who ply their trade there. The clue to *spintriae* is the phrase *multiplīci patientia*, since *patientia* in a sexual context signifies the act of the passive partner (*pathicus*) in a sexual act.”

And then, at a slight angle, there is Suetonius’s version: not *sellarii* (people), but *sellaria* (places), where the *spintriae* perform. Hurley’s brilliantly suggestive “holey places” captures both the sense of “latrine” and its associated vice, as she duly annotates: “*Sellarium*, ‘a place for seats,’ was a latrine. Tiberius used it to suggest anal intercourse” (Rolfe 1998 [1913]: 371n89). But older translations are content with the more sedate and equally possible “couches.”² And Robert Graves’s Penguin version (1957, revised by J. B. Rives in 2007) is satisfied with the vague “a private playhouse,” while C. Edwards’s Oxford World Classics text offers the similarly imprecise “a suite which was to be the location for his secret pleasures” for *sellaria ... sedem arcanarum libidinum* (2000: 119).

No such reticence restrains the translations of Suetonian *spintriae*: “anal-ists” (Hurley); “spintrian perverts” (Graves on *Calig.* 16.1); “tight-bums” (Edwards); “sphincters”; “male prostitutes”; “the derivation from σφιγκτήρ indicates anal sex”; “a particular group of sodomites associated with Tiberius in his retreat on Capreae.”³

In short, we seem to have a consensus that the *sellaria* of Tiberius are latrines, that *sellarii* are men who hang around them for immoral purposes, and that *spintriae* are male prostitutes.

II.

Let us start with the first two words. *Sellaria* and *sellarii* are unquestionably derived from *sella*, something you sit on: a chair; a seat; a bench. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* offers a total of four instances of our two words: the entry for *sellarium*, “privy,” cites Plin. *HN* 34.84 and 36.111, and Suet. *Tib.* 43; while that for *sellarius*, “a type of male prostitute (cf. prec.),” cites Tac. *Ann.* 6.1.⁴ How these definitions are reached is a mystery. Three questions occur. What

²Lana 1952: 227, “camere con divani”; Ailloud 1931: 34, “un local garni de bancs.”

³The last four quotations derive respectively from Hubbard 2003: 186; Lindsay 1995: 140; Wardle 1994: 168; and Hurley 1993: 53.

⁴If there are any other literary references to *sellarium/us* than these four, I have not found them. Epigraphically we also have a *sellarius* at *ILS* 5313 (Rome), the only other reference in the rubric of the *OLD*. He appears in a list of members of a racing establishment, presumably a saddle-maker or a jockey, but certainly not a prostitute. (*Bisellarius* and *subsellarius* are irrelevant, although single variants of each do appear without the “i,” *bisellariorum* at *CIL* 14. 4136 and *supsellarius* at *ILS* 7634.)

is the relevance of privies or latrines? What does foulness, as in *foeditas loci*, signify? And how many entities are we dealing with?

The first is baffling: why ever latrines? To judge from the rubrics in the *OLD*, a *sella* is a seat, stool, or chair; whence derive the more specific meanings of a magistrate's chair of office; a sedan chair; and (indeed) a commode. But the leap from that last, special, and not especially common meaning of *sella* to the assumption that a *sellarium* was a latrine full of such *sellae* is pure fancy: sometimes a sitting-room is just a sitting-room. Regardless of the depravity that unfolded in the place, there is no hint of any lavatorial significance in our two passages in Suetonius and Tacitus. The other two citations of the word both come from Pliny, and both appear in condemnations of Nero's Golden House. In the first, *HN* 34.84, Pliny deplores the emperor's looting of great works of art in Greece and depositing his spoils in the *sellaria* of the Golden House: *violentia Neronis in urbem convecta et in sellariis domus aureae disposita*. In the second citation, 36.111, he reflects on the contrast between the enormous mansions of Caligula and Nero and the modest dwellings of the heroes of the old Republic, whose whole estates took up less space than the *sellaria* of those houses: *quorum agri quoque minorem modum optinuerunt quam sellaria istorum!* Now *sellae* might indeed mean seats in a latrine (Mart. 12.77.9), and the assumption that *sellaria* therefore signify a latrine might be supported by the *foeditas loci* in Tacitus, but that is not at all necessary, and no parallel can be cited. In Pliny, *sellaria* should to the unjaundiced eye mean, neutrally, "sitting-rooms," places with seats, which is just how the *Loeb* translators take it, and Lewis and Short before them, and Forcellini before them.⁵

But above all, we must reject the fixation on male prostitutes. Implicit in this, explicit in Martin's formulation in 2001, is the assumption that latrines were where male prostitutes plied their trade. But—whatever practices may obtain today—there is no ancient evidence for this. The authoritative modern study has laid out the facts: Roman cruising grounds were the baths (above all), brothels of course, wharves, and theaters.⁶ Latrines are a modern fantasy.

If not (or not necessarily) privies, what then, secondly, of the "foulness of the place" that evoked the name *sellaria*? Foulness may suggest a range of associations beyond mere scatology, and there is an obvious answer, for *sellaria* lead us not to seats in latrines, but to prostitution. One of the commonest modes of solicitation at Rome was to sit on a chair, *sella*, outside of the place of business, be it brothel, inn, or rented room. Juvenal has a prostitute perched

⁵ Whatever his failings as an aesthete, it is hard to imagine Nero so boorish as to display his prized sculptures in the lavatory.

⁶ Taylor 1997: 341, 363–70.

on an *alta ... sella* (3.136), indeed his late antique scholiast calls her a *sellaria*.⁷ That is to say, the connotation of *sellaria*, and the foulness of the place, is not one of latrines and cruising males—let alone of some hypothetical act of sodomy on lavatory seats, or anywhere else—but rather one of advertisement, of show, of displaying oneself on a stool provocatively, in front of one's professional bedroom, for the purpose of prostitution.

Thirdly, there is the crucial matter of numbers. Juvenal's scholiast aside, there are no more than four references in ancient literature to *sellaria/sellarii*: but are there even that many? Both instances of *sellaria* in Pliny refer to a single place or area, somewhere within Nero's Golden House (let us omit Caligula for the moment): nowhere else in Rome or its vast empire (Capri aside). That is to say, the two references are in essence one.

Our two other authorities, Tacitus and Suetonius on Capri, pose a related problem, but in different fashion. No one would doubt that Tacitus and Suetonius shared, and their texts are pervaded by, at least two major sources, now lost. That they are dependent on a single hostile authority for Tiberius's misdeeds on Capri is signaled in these passages by the pairing of *sellarii/a* and *spintriae*; by Tacitus's *conquirent* and Suetonius's *conquisiti*; by the echo between Tacitus's *multiplici patientia* and Suetonius's *triplici serie connexi*; by Tiberius's being attracted by various visual *incitament(a) cupidinis* in Tacitus and his watching *ut ... libidines excitaret* in Suetonius; and by the prominence in both authors of *pubem/pube*.⁸ But there is a curious double vision at play here. Tacitus reports only two new words, *ignota antea vocabula reperta sunt sellariorum et spintriarum*. Suetonius likewise reports only two words, *sellaria excogitavit ... spintrias appellabat*. Yet somehow *three* words have crept into our dictionaries: *sellarii*, *sellaria*, and *spintriae*. Now it is always possible that the common source used all three, and that our two surviving authors each chose to report only two of them: just not the same two. But let us wield a tiny Occam's razor and assume that the lost source recorded only *two* neologisms. The discrepancy should then lie not in variant ancient versions but in a simple modern misunderstanding: Tacitus's *sellariorum* ought to be the genitive plural, not of the otherwise hapax legomenon *sellarii*, but of the

⁷ Adams 1983: 329–30, with examples rather than an exhaustive list. For the association of *foeditas* and prostitution, note Mart. 9.7.2, cf. Tac. *Ann.* 13.25.1, and especially Juv. 6.132 and 8.225–26. Note also Hor. *Sat.* 1.2.30, on the prostitute *olenti in fornice stantem*.

⁸ A subject not to be pursued here, the source is clearly hostile, and most likely Servilius Nonianus.

neuter *sellaria* otherwise attested in Suetonius and Pliny.⁹ That is to say, the two references in Tacitus and Suetonius are in essence one.

Two lexicographical revisions follow from all of this:

First, *sellarium* with the meaning of “latrine” or “privy” should be deleted from the dictionary, as both unattested and unwarranted. Rather than this general meaning in the unparalleled singular, we should see in the occurrences of the plural noun precise references to two specific *places*, and two only, one of them situated somewhere within an imperial palace at Rome (Nero’s, and perhaps Caligula’s), the other in an imperial palace on Capri (Tiberius’s). Let us go further. Suetonius glosses *sellaria* in the singular, *sedem ... in quam*, while Tacitus refers to a singular *locus* (*foedus*). Should we then understand, not rooms called *sellaria*, but a suite of rooms (Suetonius’s *cubicula*) known collectively as “The Sellaria,” “The Place of Seats” (or Benches), in short: “The Brothel”?

That would illuminate what follows immediately in Suetonius’s account, young Pans and nymphs offering themselves (*prostantis*) in the woods and groves in an area known as The Caprineum, The Shrine of the Goat. That is to say, by reading Sellaria as a proper noun we see that the paragraph forms a unity in Suetonius’s mind: for debauchery on Capri you had the luxury of two venues, one indoors, one outdoors, offering notably similar pleasures. Both presented not only the private act of prostitution but the public act of solicitation that preceded it: to attract their clients, prostitutes sat (*sedere*) on chairs (*sellae*) outside their place of business or they stood there in front (*prostare*), precisely what we have here with *sellaria* and *prostantis*.¹⁰

Once invented by Tiberius on Capri, the Sellaria (we might surmise) was copied at Rome by Gaius Caligula. Pliny gives the name without details, but Suetonius appears to supply the details without the name, in his account of one of the young *princeps*’s schemes for making money: “he opened a brothel (*lupanar*) on the Palatine, setting apart a number of rooms and furnishing them to suit the grandeur of the place, where matrons and freeborn youths should stand exposed (*starent*).”¹¹ It is not otherwise recorded but only too

⁹ At first glance, *sellaria* are the places in or on which the *spintriae* performed. If *sellarium* is tied to *foeditas loci* (place), and balanced in Tacitus by *spintriarum* and *multiplici patientia* (people), that again suggests that the word signifies a place rather than people.

¹⁰ On *prostare*, see Adams 1983: 331–32 with examples. Note also Sen. *Ben.* 1.9.3.

¹¹ Translation Rolfe 1998 [1913]: 481, slightly modified, of *Calig.* 41.1: *ac ne quod non manubiarum genus experiretur, lupanar in Palatio constituit, districtisque et instructis pro loci dignitate compluribus cellis, in quibus matronae ingenuique starent* (Suetonius continues: *misit circum fora et basilicas nomenclatores ad invitandos ad libidinem iuvenes senesque ...*); cf. Cass. Dio 59.28.9; McGinn 1998.

likely that Nero too had a Brothel in his Golden House, for he certainly had a penchant for similar tableaux, in which prostitution in mock brothels and taverns played a central part, around the Lake of Agrippa in the Campus Martius, in the Naumachia of Augustus across the Tiber, and indeed along the riverbanks down to the sea: why not then in a Sellaria in his palace? With his disgrace and death, the Sellaria, the elaborate mock brothel of the Claudian emperors, disappears.¹²

Second, the word *sellarius*, meaning male prostitute, is also to be deleted from the dictionary, as likewise unattested and unwarranted. Its absence will help to dispel misunderstanding about the notorious *spintriae*.

III.

Soon after the death of the old *princeps*, his successor expelled the *spintrias monstrosarum libidinum* from Rome—how they got there is a question, for their occupation is inextricably part of the legend of Capri—and he was barely dissuaded from drowning them in the sea (Suet. *Calig.* 16.1; cf. *SHA Alex. Sev.* 34.4). The story does come in a package of his virtuous deeds from the early days of the reign, but it still seems a bit rich from a Caligula: if *he* disapproved of the *spintriae*, they must have been very bad indeed. Who were they and what monstrous things did they do?

The *OLD*, confident and discreet, offers: “spintria, -ae, *m.* [cf. Gk. σφιγκτής] A type of male prostitute,” citing Petronius 113.11, as well as the Tacitus and the two Suetonius passages noted above, and Suetonius’s life of Vitellius, 3.2.¹³

¹² Note also Messalina “sitting” (ἐκαθήετο) in the palace to play the prostitute, and having other noble women join her in public sexual performances: Cass. Dio 60.31.1, 18.1. There does seem to be a fifth echo of *sellaria* at Mart. 5.70: *infusum sibi nuper a patrono / plenum, Maxime, centiens Syrisus / in sellariolis vagus popinis / circa balnea quattuor peregit. / o quanta est gula, centiens comesse! / quanto maior adhuc, nec accubare* (68–73). As translated by Taylor 1997: “Syriscus pulled in the full ten million showered on him by his patron recently, Maximus, just by hanging about on cantina barstools down around the four bathhouses. Oh what a gorge to gobble down ten millions! Yet how much greater a feat not even to recline with him!” *Sellariolis* is presumably a diminutive of *sellaria*, but it should not mean “barstools” (cf. “stools” in the *Loeb* edition of Shackleton Bailey 1993), and the word’s relationship with *popinis* is not clear: understand “popinae which are/called little Sellaria”?

¹³ Cass. Dio claims (64.4.2) that Vitellius had been Tiberius’s boytoy (Gk. παιδικά). Add *SHA Heliogab.* 33.1: *libidinum genera quaedam invenit, ut spinthrias veterum imperatorum vinceret* (“he invented certain kinds of lust, in order to surpass the *spintriae* of the emperors of old”). The latter is valuable in suggesting that the term was evanescent, and it does indeed seem confined to the mid-first century.

Lewis and Short are startlingly forthright: “[from σφιγκτήρ, the contractile muscle of the anus], a male prostitute.” The derivation of the term from the Greek seemed obvious to the lexicographers, hence the connotation of anal intercourse. LSJ notes an obscure fragment of Cratinus preserved by Photius where Greek σφιγκτης means pederast, and it is glossed as κίναϊδος in Hesychius, the only two references cited for the word. Thus we have in English Martin’s “squeezers,” Woodman’s “catamites,” Hurley’s “analists.” But the derivation of the word from the anal sphincter is highly dubious, the emphasis on intercourse between males especially misleading, the notion of male prostitutes another imported modern fantasy.

We know more about how the word was created than what it actually means. J. André traced the development in Latin of Greek feminine agent nouns with the suffix “-tria”: *citharistria*, *psaltria*, *sambucistria* being the oldest; followed by *poetria*; *crotalistria* (and *spintria*); *hierophantria*, *lyristria*, *pharmaceutria*; *sophistria*, *tympanistria*; and, the latest additions, *ascetria* and *monastria*. As he observed, all are *female* professionals, and we can see that their Latin borrowings (*spintriae* aside) represent three occupational groupings: musical, literary, and religious.¹⁴

J. N. Adams has added the crucial item: at *Satyricon* 37.6 Petronius offers *lupatria*, prostitute, where the Greek suffix is attached to a Latin root, here the common slang term for prostitute, *lupa*, she-wolf.¹⁵ As Adams elucidated, “[i]t is to be presumed that among bilingual speakers of Latin the normal Greek process of derivation was forgotten once the suffix -tria had acquired an association with female purveyors of sex (cf. λαικάστρια). Therefore the suffix could be applied to a Latin base (even one which was non-verbal) provided that the semantic field was appropriate.” Hence the sexual terms *lupatria* and *spintria*. In a note Adams observed that the origin of *spintria* was not straightforward: “[i]t designates someone engaged in an act of copulation involving three participants. The word is masculine in Suetonius, but may originally have been coined as a feminine (since one female can participate in such an act). It may have been generalised to include all three members of the sexual chain, passing into the generalising masculine in the process.”¹⁶

This introduces two fundamental and (as will emerge) related points. One is that the root of *spintria*, like that of *lupatria*, is Latin, not Greek.

¹⁴ André 1971: 103–7. I am indebted to Joshua Katz for the essential references here and in n16.

¹⁵ Neumann 1980 emends *lupatria* to *lupatris*, unconvincingly in my opinion. For *lupa* as prostitute: Adams 1983: 333–35.

¹⁶ Adams 2003: 420 and n15.

The other is that the word may have begun (indeed, surely did begin) as a feminine coinage.

The well-attested common Greek word σφιγκτήρ and the obscure σφιγκτής/*cinaedus*, related though they may be, are misleading. The *spintria*'s immediate antecedent should be the Latin *spinter*, bracelet or armlet, something that encircles and binds the arm, known to Plautus and defined by Festus (448–49L) as a kind of armlet which women used to wear in the old days on their upper left arm.¹⁷ *Spinter* surely offers a better key to the meaning of *spintria*: at first sight, a *spintria* should simply be a woman who provided the same service for a client, binding and compressing not his arm but his penis, be it orally, vaginally, or anally.¹⁸ In the dynamics of Roman sex, such activities would count as *patientia*, playing the submissive or womanly role, which is the word Tacitus uses to explain *spintria*. A precise definition would thus be “bracelet worker,” analogous to *lupatria* as “she-wolf worker,” another bilingual hybrid slang term for female sex workers.¹⁹

What then of the *spintria* as “male prostitute”? Despite the confident definition in our dictionaries, there is no evidence that the *spintriae* were exclusively male, that is, that their ranks did not include *both* females and effeminate males.

Start with Suet. *Tib.* 43.1. Again: *secessu vero Caprensi etiam sellaria excogitavit, sedem arcanarum libidinum, in quam undique conquisiti puellarum et exoletorum greges monstrosique concubitus repertores, quos spintrias appellabat, triplici serie conexi, in vicem incestarent coram ipso, ut aspectu deficientis libidines excitaret.* Inelegantly and without punctuation: “In his Caprean retreat he even invented the Sellaria a place for secret lusts in which sought out from everywhere gangs of girls and of mature catamites and devisers of monstrous coupling whom he called *spintriae* joined together in triple chains that they

¹⁷ References in Forcellini, Lewis and Short, *OLD*.

¹⁸ As Joshua Katz points out, *lupa* : *lupatria* :: *spinter* : *spintria* is not perfectly proportional, since the former would have to be based on (a non-existent) **lupater*.

¹⁹ One variation on the bracelet image may be noted, the older notion, not offered lately, that the participants formed a bracelet-like chain, mouth to genital and so on round a circle. This *monstrum* is certainly possible, but such a circular tableau is completely unattested in our ancient literary and artistic sources for group sex (n24 below). It would seem to be a minor, and soon tedious, addition to the repertoire. Moreover the *schema* is hard to define as involving *multiplex patientia*. Which is to say that *multiplex* would have to refer to the *patientia* of all players as a group, since each individual would be involved with two others but “patient” to only one of them.

might defile each other before him so that he might arouse his declining lusts by the sight.”²⁰

How the components of this sentence fit together is not at all clear. Specifically, how are the participles *conquisiti* and *conexi* related to the two nouns *greges* and *repertores*? If *conquisiti* refers only to the *greges*, *conexi* must refer only to the *repertores*, thus shaping a chiasmic pair: *conquisiti ... greges* and *repertores ... conexi*. But if that were the case, then *repertores* would be awkwardly isolated from the phrase *in quam* which is closely tied to *conquisiti*: that is, the *repertores* would be left outside the *sedem arcanarum libidinum*. Therefore the two participles must refer rather to both nouns, the *greges* (comprised of *puellae* and *exoleti*) and the *repertores* are both *conquisiti* and *conexi*, and the *spintriae* are both male and female.²¹

The few other attestations of the word *spintria(e)* offer no clear indication of its gender. If we look closely at Tacitus, he gives no sure clue as to the sex of Tiberius’s victims (which is how he presents them), merely emphasizing their youth, *pueritia*. Nor does Suetonius in the *Caligula* passage noted above. Nor is the alleged attachment of the scurrilous cognomen “Spintria” to Vitellius, after his debauched boyhood on Capri, any indication, since a female nickname (if that is what it is) could always be applied abusively to a male.²² And the passage in Petronius is, despite speculation, a fragment without context.²³

Two further arguments may be brought to support the contention that *spintriae* were boys and girls together. One concerns the norms in sexual encounters with more than one partner.²⁴ First, the number of participants in ancient group sexual encounters was 3 or 4, no more (and of course no

²⁰ *Sellaria ... sedem*: a conscious pun by Suetonius or his source? *Arcanarum*: not only “hidden,” but also with our connotation of “arcane,” not for the vulgar? *Exoleti*, “mature catamites,” not “male prostitutes” as in the *OLD*: see n29 below. *Deficientis*: “declining lusts,” or “lusts of the declining (Tiberius)”?

²¹ Bob Kaster has sharpened the argument here. A translation of the sentence follows below.

²² Suet. *Vit.* 3.2. Curiously, the fragmentary *CIL* 6.37761 seems to record an *Augusti libertus* who appears to have been the brother of *nomenclator Vitelli Spintheri*: *Aug. lib. --- / nomenclatoris* (in larger letters) / *Vitelli . Spintheris frater*.

²³ *Sat.* 113.11: *si quid ingenui sanguinis habes, non pluris illum facies quam scortum, si vir fueris, non ibis ad spintriam*. One group of manuscripts prefaces this with [*Ancilla Tryphaenae ad Encolpium*], presuming a reference to Giton, Encolpius’s boyfriend, on what authority it is not clear.

²⁴ The full range of artistic representation is represented in Clarke’s excellent book of 2003. Vorberg 1928–32 has a lot of illustrations: group sex does not loom large.

fewer).²⁵ That is to say, there seems to be no example of ancient art depicting more than four people involved in a single sexual encounter (as distinct from simultaneous but discrete acts), and only one such occurrence in literature, in Martial, who dismisses such *Veneris novae figurae* as not real but the novel and overheated imaginings of a filthy poet.²⁶ And second, the sexes were mixed, that is, both men and women were involved when there were more than two partners. Again, there seems to be no depiction of purely homosexual group sex (in the sense of all male or all female) in Greco-Roman art, and there are only two references to it in literature, the one just referred to (a bad poet's hitherto unknown fantasies), the other in Seneca's lurid denunciation of the unutterably depraved Hostius Quadra, who is depicted in the same passage as indulging in sex with men and women together, and with two and three partners indifferently (*Q Nat.* 1.16.5).

Which leads to the second argument in favor of mixed sport, that is, consideration of the alleged tastes of Tiberius Caesar. Just as he did not transgress the norm of three or four performers, *triplici serie conexi*, so it should be noted that he was not much interested in men as sexual objects: apart from one dubious anecdote in Suetonius, about an alleged double rape (44.2), there is no sign of homosexual desire in the *princeps*—his tastes are represented as inclined in quite other directions (after, of course, more than six decades of domestic normality). Why then would he want an all-male troupe of prostitutes? And most puzzling, of what use would the notorious books of Elephantis be to such an all-male troupe? All that we know about them indicates that her works were concerned only with heterosexual intercourse.²⁷

²⁵ Examples of threesomes: Clarke 2003: 38–39, 129, 144, 145, 146, 147, 151; Johns 1982: 120, 130–31, 133; Auson. *Epp.* 43 Green (from Strato, *Anth. Pal.* 11.225, 12.210); Mart. 10.81, 11.81 (a failure); Petron. *Sat.* 140.7–10; Sen. *Q Nat.* 1.16.5. Foursomes: Clarke 2003: 131, 139; Johns 1982: 140; Mart. 9.32.4; Sen. *Q Nat.* 1.16.7; Gallus, *Anth. Pal.* 5.491; Nicarchus 11.328.

²⁶ Mart. 12.43: "Sabellus's" verses discuss five and even more *symplegmata*, performed by *exoleti*, new "figures of Venus," unknown to eunuchs and the soft books of Elephantis, the sort of things that only a *perditus fututor* would dare.

²⁷ Among references to her sex manual, *Priapea* 4 and the lemma to *Anth. Pal.* 7. 345 (cf. 450) definitely indicate heterosexuality; Tatian, *Ad Gr.* 34.9, Mart. 12.43, and Suet. *Tib.* 43.2 are not clear. Otherwise, from the only other references to her work we can say that Elephantis certainly wrote on subjects of feminine interest: cosmetics (Galen 12.426K) and menstrual blood as an abortifacient (Plin. *HN* 28. 81). All references to the work of her much better attested predecessor, Philaenis, with whom she is often cited, suggest that it too was exclusively heterosexual.

In sum, *spintria* as “male prostitute” is to be deleted from the lexicon as unwarranted and misleading. That definition is inferred solely from an assumed but unattested connection with the binding sphincter muscle, and hence with anal intercourse between males, and belief in it is confirmed by the supposed but unwarranted association with the fictitious *sellarii* here, and compounded by the misunderstanding, here as elsewhere, of *exoleti* as male prostitutes.²⁸ Rather, *spintriae* were “bracelet workers,” the term indicating female sex workers. Their ranks surely included both females and males so passive, or bisexual, as to be called female sex workers. They performed in groups, and the *spintria* was or could be multiply submissive (*multiplici patientia*) in a tableau of three or four; that is, she or he was penetrated, acted as a “bracelet,” two or three ways simultaneously.

A proper translation of Suet. *Tib.* 43.1 should thus read (to rephrase Hurley): “On retiring to Capri he devised the Sellaria as a site for his secret orgies: there select teams of girls and mature catamites, along with inventors of deviant intercourse, [all of] whom he dubbed “bracelet workers,” copulated before him in triple unions to excite his flagging passions.”

IV.

Spintriae, *sellarii*, and *exoleti* as male prostitutes are all modern fantasies—indeed it is most unlikely that the *sellarii* ever existed—and they impede proper understanding of the curious practices on Capri. The frisson elicited by their being *male* prostitutes (men or boys who submitted to men for money, willingly or not) deflects attention from their being *prostitutes* at all. They were not, and therein lies the paradox of the *spintriae*.

Tacitus and Suetonius, and their lost source, are clear. According to Tacitus, the performers were young (*pubem*, *pueritiam*, cf. *parens*) and good-looking (*forma*, *decora corpora*), some were modest (*modestiam*, *abnuentis*), some nobly born (*imagines maiorum*), some actually eager (*promptos*): no hint of professionals, these are freeborn targets of a tyrant’s lusts. Suetonius confirms that they were young (*puellae*, *pube*) and of both sexes (*puellae* and *exoleti*, cf. *utriusque sexus*), but he says nothing about their being professional (or unwilling). The only alleged *spintria* who is named, Aulus Vitellius, offers a perfect example of the type, for he was indeed young (born in 15 C.E.), an amateur, free and indeed highly born, and apparently eager: “He spent his boyhood and early youth at Capreae among Tiberius’s prostitutes (*scorta*),

²⁸ *Exoleti*, commonly misunderstood as “male prostitutes,” signifies rather grown-up *delicati*, ex-catamites, boy favorites beyond their sell-by date, as demonstrated by Butrica 2005: 225–31.

being branded for all time with the nickname *Spintria* and suspected of having been the beginning and cause of his father's advancements in rank at the expense of his own chastity."²⁹ But Vitellius was *not* a prostitute and far from it. Whoever the *Tiberiana scorta* may have been—and the phrase should convey Suetonian disapproval more than precise definition—our only evidence suggests that the *spintriae* were well-born youths of both sexes, objects of an old man's fantasies and of their parents' fear or ambition.

But Tiberius *treated* them as prostitutes, adding insult to injury, degradation to sexual abuse, for both of his neologisms were coinages from the language of prostitution: *sellaria* suggesting a brothel, *spintriae* sex workers. Most significantly, Suetonius presents the *princeps* not as a participant in, but as a voyeur of, their acts, *ut aspectu deficientis libidines excitaret*. And if we read Tacitus closely, although he sketches a vivid portrait of the lustful tyrant, he does not actually accuse Tiberius of having physical contact with his victims. Good looks, modesty, and noble ancestors were the incitement to his lust, *incitamentum cupidinis*. *Pubem ingenuam stupris pollueret*, he polluted freeborn youngsters in illicit sex. But this awful picture is something of a *trompe l'oeil*, for we are not told that he vented his own *cupido* on the noble youths, nor that he polluted them with his own *stupra*, let alone that he might have participated himself in their *multiplex patientia*. The emphasis on his watching, on scopophilia, was surely in the lost source, transmitted by Suetonius and veiled by Tacitus. With the language of prostitution coined by Tiberius we move beyond voyeurism into theater.

The *cubicula* on Capri were stocked with the most obscene of artworks, both painting and sculpture, and the illustrated sex manual of Elephantis, to provide examples if need be. This need for blueprints, as it were, strongly suggests that, whatever outrage the group couplings may have aroused, novelty was not its cause. If the performers were at a loss, when they inspected the artworks around them, perhaps even paused to look something up in the library, they did so to discover *exemplar imperatae schemae*, an example of the posture which had been ordered.³⁰ That is, if Suetonius is to be believed,

²⁹ Translation Rolfe 1998 [1913], modified, of Suet. *Vit.* 3.2: *pueritiam primamque adulescentiam Capreis egit inter Tiberiana scorta, et ipse perpetuo Spintriae cognomine notatus existimatusque corporis gratia initium et causa incrementorum patri fuisse*. The father, L. Vitellius, a new man and *consul ordinarius* in 34 C.E., was clearly close to Tiberius. It should be noted that Suetonius refers not to the beginning of Lucius's career (as in modern translations, but chronologically impossible) but to its advancement (that is after Tiberius's retirement to Capri in 27, which is plausible if true).

³⁰ The alternative manuscript reading of *impetratae* does not affect the point here.

the performers were treated neither as creative artists nor as professional sex workers: they were more like actors in a pornographic film, doing what they were directed to do.

The performative nature of these activities suggests that we should locate Tiberius's activities not only in the history of Roman sexual customs but in broader cultural interests of his day. Three practices might be evoked.

First is the passion for what has been called, romantically but accurately, "the landscape of allusion." In a form of cultural imperialism, well-to-do Romans recreated other times and places, real and fictional, in their own environment, reforming landscapes and erecting buildings, stocking them with original works of art and craft or with reproductions, and then relaxing in their fantasy worlds. Of many examples, Cicero's villa at Tusculum and Hadrian's near Tibur come to mind, the former with its Lyceum and Academy, the latter with its elaborate reimaginings of those Athenian sites appropriate to cogitation—the Lyceum, the Academy, the Stoa Poikile—along with Egyptian Canopus, the Vale of Tempe in Thessaly, even the Underworld. Capri, as the private refuge of the Caesars, was just the sort of place where we might expect to find such recreations. Augustus set the tone, naming a nearby islet Apragopolis, the City of Leisure. The twelve imperial villas on the island, all certainly stocked with works of art, were given elaborate names, though what those were is not quite clear. Tiberius is forever associated with the greatest of them, the so-called Villa Iovis, the Villa of Jupiter, which included on its grounds an enormous replica of the great Lighthouse of Alexandria, the Pharos, and a place called, probably, The Butchery, Carnificina. Into such a landscape the mock-Brothel, the Sellaria, and the mock-shrine, the Caprineum, fit comfortably, stage-sets, as we have seen, ostentatiously devoted to depravity.³¹

Within this physical context, second, we should consider the Roman love for elaborate mythological tableaux vivants with costumes and role-playing, a pleasure particularly associated with dinner parties: the image of Victory crowning Metellus Pius at the magnificent banquet of Urbinius; the singing Orpheus and his wild beasts at the silvan banquet of Hortensius; the merman Glaucus dancing—reed-crowned, fish-tailed, painted blue—at the banquet

³¹ Görler 1990 offers a convenient introduction to this naming phenomenon; note now Gowers 2010: also relevant are the rooms or apartments on imperial property at Rome, such as the Syracusae and the Hermaeum (Suet. *Aug.* 72.2, *Claud.* 10.1). On the landscape of allusion: Bergmann 1999: 103–6; 2001. The "Goat" enshrined on Capri presumably refers not only to the Little Pans but to the old goat himself, Tiberius: cf. Suet. *Tib.* 45. The widespread "abuse" of the island's name (Goat Island) is heavily ironic but not necessarily hostile.

of Antony and Cleopatra; Octavian as Apollo presiding over the feast of the twelve gods; Bacchus and his Bacchantes celebrating the vintage at the house of Silius, the “husband” of Messalina; Ajax gone mad at the banquet of Trimalchio.³² Or, on Capri, young Pans and Nymphs disporting in their native woods and groves outside of welcoming caves and hollows. The actors in such entertainments need not be professional entertainers or servants, for Glaucus and Bacchus were played by senators, Apollo by the future Augustus himself—and the Pans and Nymphs by free and even nobly born boys and girls.

And close to this, third, a very special kind of role-playing, with deliberate status reversal: the temporary establishment of private brothels staffed by respectable Roman matrons. As we have seen, Caligula and Nero would later relish these mock brothels and taverns, but the grand example for such elaborately transgressive performances had been provided long before, by the *flagitiosum convivium* staged at his home by a *tribunicus viator* in 52 B.C.E., attended not only by tribunes of the plebs but by the consul Metellus Scipio himself: on that occasion the host had set to prostitution two noble ladies, Mucia and Fulvia, and a noble youth named Saturninus, *probrosae patientiae corpora*. How far this role-playing actually went is not clear, and it may well be that such occasions were less orgies and more risqué costume parties, but the no less notorious feast of the twelve Olympians hosted by Octavian certainly gave rise to rumors about “new adulteries,” and the *vindemia* of Messalina and Silius was a true bacchanal.³³ It is in this context that the Sellaria of Caligula at Rome and the tableaux of Nero at Rome and elsewhere are probably to be set: the latter repeatedly emphasized high-class ladies performing in temporary brothels, while the former, with its decorated *cellae*, staffed by matrons and freeborn youths who stood (*starent*) to offer themselves, is strikingly reminiscent of the Sellaria and Caprineum on Capri.³⁴

³² Macrob. *Sat.* 3.13.7–9, cf. Val. Max. 9.1.5; Varro *Rust.* 3.13.2–3; Vell. Pat. 2.83.2; Suet. *Aug.* 70.1; Tac. *Ann.* 11.31.2; Petron. *Sat.* 59.7. Cf. Domitian’s terrifying banquet of the dead, presumably set in Hades with the emperor as Pluto: Cass. Dio 67.9.

³³ Note particularly the allegations about Messalina playing the prostitute in the palace (Cass. Dio 60.31.1, 18.1) and Julia in the forum *ad Marsyam* (Sen. *Ben.* 6.32.1). On Nero’s theatricals, Champlin 2003: 153–56. The banquet of 52 B.C.E.: Val. Max. 9.1.8. The tribunes of that year were a racy crew, including Caelius Rufus and Sallustius Crispus. The perplexing story of Vistilia, a lady of senatorial rank who registered as a prostitute in 19 C.E. and was sent into exile for her trouble, is perhaps to be considered in this light; as is indeed the whole phenomenon of members of the upper classes yearning to perform in theater, arena, and circus.

³⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 14.15, 15.37; Suet. *Ner.* 27, *Calig.* 41.1.

Sexual liberation, costumes, role-playing, exotic locales, privacy. Capri was a very special place of retreat, for there a Roman could cast off the constraints not just of public but even of private life, both *negotium* and *otium*, and indulge in pure idleness, *desidia*. In his last days Augustus had distributed Roman togas and Greek pallia to his entourage on the island, and he had decreed that the Romans should wear Greek dress and speak Greek, while Greeks did the reverse.³⁵ Suetonius tells us that Tiberius summoned the eighteen-year-old Gaius Caligula to Capri in 31 C.E., presumably as he prepared his coup against Sejanus. Gaius was able to retain his inhuman composure there despite the swirl of plots around him and the disasters befalling his near relatives. Yet, as his biographer explains, “even at the time he could not control his natural cruelty and viciousness, but he was a most eager witness of the tortures and executions of those who suffered punishment.” And then the really interesting part: “at night he indulged in dissipations and adulteries, disguised in a wig and a long robe, and he was passionately devoted to the theatrical arts of dancing and singing, in which Tiberius very willingly indulged him, in the hope that through these his savage nature might be softened.”³⁶ Has Suetonius, as he often did, quite misunderstood the substance of what he transmits? Sexual liberation and sex as performance, theatrical costume and singing and dancing, sanctioned by the *princeps* as educational. Tacitus reports that some at least of the actors in Tiberius’s sellarian scenarios were ready participants; and, most curiously, Suetonius says nothing about the intimidation reported by Tacitus, when he really should have condemned it. Behind the staged horror of the “dark pleasures” of Tiberius Caesar in the Neverland of Capri, might we suspect that some of the actors involved were perhaps relaxing—in precedent, if not at all respectable, Roman ways—perhaps even enjoying themselves? There may not be a lot more to say about Tiberius’s interest in sex, but his passion for the theater is another matter.

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³⁵ Suet. *Aug.* 98.3; *desidia* at 98.4.

³⁶ Translation Rolfe 1998 [1913], modified, of *Calig.* 11: *naturam tamen saevam atque probrosam ne tunc quidem inhibere poterat, quin et animadversionibus poenisque ad supplicium datorum cupidissime interesset et ganeas atque adulteria capillamento celatus et veste longa noctibus obiret ac scaenicas saltandi canendique artes studiosissime appeteret, facile id sane Tiberio patiente, si per has mansue fieri posset ferum eius ingenium.* The bloodthirsty *animadversiones poenaeque* may have been equally theatrical.

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