

# NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

## MOSQUITO CONTROL IN PLAUTUS

eho tu nihili, cana culex, vix teneor quin quae decent te dicam,  
senectan aetate unguentatus per vias, ignave, incedis?

[*Casina* 239–40]

The *matrona* Cleostrata addresses these words to her elderly husband Lysidamus, who is scheming to bed down secretly with a young *ancilla*. In verse 239 editors regularly print *tu nihili, cana culex* for the transmitted *tu nihil hic anaculix*, a meaningless reading. (The correction was already made in some medieval MSS.) No one, to my knowledge, has questioned the soundness of *cana culex*; *TLL*, s.v. *culex* (4:1287. 31) offers this interpretation: “translate de sene amatore, qui tanquam culex amicam circumvolitet: Plaut. *Cas.* 239.” The expression “white-haired mosquito,” while not impossible, is curious and ought to have been examined. In this passage the adjective *canus* should be the common denominator of the comparison; what is wanted is a creature which shares with old men the attribute *canities*. The *culex* is not that creature. Doubts further increase when it is observed that *culex*, a rather common word, nowhere else occurs in the feminine gender (*cana culex*).<sup>1</sup> If there is some comic point in deliberately changing the gender and calling an old roué a “white-haired lady mosquito,” I own that I have missed it.

The ending *-ix* rather than *-ex* in the MSS is no accident. Restore what Plautus wrote by changing one letter and reading *cana fulix*. The *fulix*, or *fulica*, is a bird—the coot. Cleostrata called her husband an “old coot”; the figure still survives in vulgar English. The Greek for this bird is *φαλαρίς*, a word which is obviously related to *φαλακρός*, “bald.” In fact, *φαλαρίς* and *fulix* may themselves be cognate.<sup>2</sup> For the origin of this “kenning,” compare LSJ, s.v. *φαλαρίς*: “*coot, Fulica atra*, so called from its *bald white head*. . . .” The “baldness” of the coot (as of the bald eagle) consists, of course, in white head-feathers. The adjective *canus* suggests that the Romans thought of the feathers in terms of white hair rather than baldness. It is pertinent to mention that old men in comedy wore white wigs and that *cano capite* is a stock comic epithet of them. See, e.g., *Merc.* 305: “tun capite cano amas senex nequissime?” Note also *Miles* 631: “si albicapillus hic, videtur neutiquam ab ingenio senex.”

Unlike *culex*, *fulica* and *fulix* are always feminine. The usual form was *fulica*,

1. The feminine gender here is a *prima facie* reason to be suspicious, *not* a certain proof of corruption. The Romans, for purposes of poetic effect, alternated between masculine and feminine gender more often than is sometimes realized; I hope on another occasion to discuss this topic in detail. Here it should be noted that the MSS have *culix*, not *culex*. The form *culix* is attested elsewhere (e.g., Martial 3. 93. 9, 11. 18. 13), and editors who have accepted this word in Plautus probably should have retained that orthography. Cf. A. Meillet and J. Vendryes, *Traité de grammaire comparée des langues classiques* (Paris, 1966), p. 420: “Pour désigner spécialement des femelles, il y a un suffixe féminin correspondant [sc. to nouns in *-ex*, as *cimex, culex*, etc.] en *-ic-* . . . : *cornix, iūnix, mātrix*.” However, there is no example of *culix* as a feminine (unless it be this passage); contrast Martial 3. 93. 9. J. M. Hunt suggests, as a possibility for our passage, *canu' culix*.

2. See H. Frisk, *Griech. Etym. Wörterbuch*, s.v. *φαλός*.

but *fulix* is attested for the poets; see Cicero *Prognostica* frag. 4 (= *Div.* 1. 8. 14) and Avienius *Aratea* 1676. The poetic fragment from Cicero begins with the words *cana fulix*.<sup>3</sup> It is even possible that *cana fulix* was a quasi-technical term for this bird; compare bald coot and bald eagle in English.

The corruption is to be explained as a routine case of an uncommon word replacing a common one. Scribes may have been familiar with "coots" as well as with "mosquitoes"; they would not have been so familiar with *fulix*, a rare byform of *fulica*.<sup>4</sup> The initial *c* of *cana* possibly facilitated the slip.

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3. *Fulix* in this passage is Marsus' certain correction for *fluxit* of the MSS. It is confirmed by Aratus *Phaen.* 913 ff.; Verg. *Georg.* 360 ff.; Pliny *HN* 18. 361–62. Compare *TLL*, s.v. *fulica*, 6.1:1522. 61–63.

4. I note as a curious coincidence that in Isidore *Etym.* 12. 7. 28 (from Pliny *HN* 10. 127) *fulicae similes* has been corrupted in one MS to *pulice similes*!

### HERODAS 6 AND 7 RECONSIDERED

Cunningham has persuasively argued that Metro and Cerdon of *Mimes* 6 and 7 are the same characters,<sup>1</sup> and Schmidt has agreed with this view.<sup>2</sup> Cunningham suggests that, in the interval between the two poems, "Metro has met Cerdon and his trade has been so profitable as to enable him to set up a shoe-shop."<sup>3</sup> This suggestion seems unnecessary. In *Mime* 6 Coritto says that Cerdon works at home and sells on the sly because of the tax collectors (63–64), but this need only refer to Cerdon's making and selling of baubons (the only thing discussed in this *Mime*) and does not preclude the possibility that Cerdon simultaneously carries on a legitimate trade as a cobbler. He sells his baubons in the privacy of his customers' homes (6. 67, 88), and by appointment only, with a woman named Artemeis as his contact person (6. 87–88). Artemeis has arranged for Cerdon to visit Coritto (6. 87–88), and Metro will visit her to arrange her appointment with Cerdon (6. 95). If Cerdon does have a cobbler's shop at the time of *Mime* 6 (and, although there is no evidence either for or against this, it is certainly possible that he does), it is clear that the shop is not where one goes for baubons.

While Cunningham is right in seeing a close relationship between *Mimes* 6 and 7, he goes wrong in reviving Headlam's suggestion that *Mime* 7 is also about baubons. Wisely, he admits that it is "impossible to treat the whole poem as a learned joke, with the surface meaning being shoes, the secondary baubons";<sup>4</sup> yet he does consider the trade in shoes only "the ostensible subject," with Cerdon in fact, as in *Mime* 6, "engaged in the selling of baubons."<sup>5</sup> Cunningham concludes, "[Cerdon's] trade in shoes is a cover for this less respectable activity."<sup>6</sup> There is, I submit, no evidence for this view, and it leads Cunningham to suggest ambiguities in the *Mime* where none exist, to misinterpret three passages, and to misunderstand the relationship between *Mimes* 6 and 7.

1. I. C. Cunningham, "Herodas 6 and 7," *CQ* 14 (1964): 33.

2. Volkmar Schmidt, *Sprachliche Untersuchungen zu Herondas* (Berlin, 1968), p. 125.

3. Cunningham, "Herodas 6 and 7," p. 33.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

5. I. C. Cunningham, ed., *Herodas: "Mimiambi"* (Oxford, 1971), p. 174.

6. *Ibid.*