

## Latin *Mas* and *Masturbari*

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The traditional etymology of Latin *masturbari*, upheld by Walde-Hofmann (1965, II: 48)<sup>1)</sup> and, more recently (with some hesitation), by J. N. Adams (1982: 208–211), sees in it a compound of *man-* ‘hand,’ the consonant stem form of the more usual *manu-*,<sup>2)</sup> plus *stuprare* ‘to defile.’ Thus *\*man-stuprari* would have meant ‘to defile oneself by hand.’ The phonological development of the first syllable of this putative compound is, as is rightly re-emphasized by Adams, perfectly regular but the *-sturbari* rather than *-stuprari* is not. In a word of this type it might be possible to see in this irregular change some sort of popular deformation and such, indeed, has been the opinion of those espousing this etymology. Two considerations, however, should make us hesitate to accept such an explanation. First, there is no evidence at the time of its earliest attestation, in Martial’s epigrams, that it was a “popular” word. It is not, for instance, to be found in graffiti but rather in a literary, mythological, context.<sup>3)</sup> Secondly, I think Hallett (1976), who rejects the traditional etymology in favor of another we will discuss in a moment, is right in saying that *stuprare* is too strong a word, semantically, to be the origin of the second part of this compound. There is no evidence that the Romans found masturbation to be defiling in the strong sense in which *stuprare* is usually used.

Hallett proposes a new etymology that avoids the phonological and semantic difficulties of the traditional one though her proposal raises its own questions. She would see *masturbari* as a morphologically and phonologically transparent compound of *mas* (in other contexts ‘male’ [both noun and adjective]) plus *turbare* ‘to excite.’

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<sup>1)</sup> It is noteworthy that Ernout-Meillet (1967: 389) offer no etymology for this word, except the possibility that it may be a deformation of Greek *μαστροπέω* ‘I pander, procure.’

<sup>2)</sup> The consonant stem is seen in the derivatives *mancus* ‘maimed,’ *manceps* ‘legal purchaser’ (from *\*one who takes to hand or by hand*), etc. It should be noted that the only productive compounding form for ‘hand’ in Latin is *manu-*, e.g., *manumitto* ‘I set at liberty.’ I do not think that there can be any doubt that for Martial at least *masturbari* was in some way connected with *manus*. One should note, for instance (at 9.41.7): *si masturbatus . . . / mandasset manibus gaudia foeda suis*. The question remains as to whether the connection is based on ‘true’ or folk etymology.

<sup>3)</sup> A caution Adams rightly raises against his own etymology.

The stumbling block to accepting this etymology is the meaning of *mas*, namely ‘membrum virile,’ that must be assumed to make the compound semantically intelligible. As J.N. Adams points out, nowhere else in Latin is such a meaning of *mas* attested. The choice between the two etymologies, leaving aside for the moment the semantic and phonological difficulties of *\*-stuprari*, is whether the first member of what everyone agrees is a compound is the morphologically unproductive (but well-attested) form *man-* ‘hand’ or the semantically unproductive (and unattested) *mas-* ‘membrum virile.’ J.N. Adams categorizes the first possibility as “defensible” and the second as “indefensible” but when we add back into the equation the semantic and phonological difficulties of *\*-stuprari* as opposed to the semantic and phonological transparency of *-turbari* the two possibilities, (1) *\*man-stuprari* ‘to defile oneself by hand’ and (2) *\*mas-turbari* ‘to excite one’s membrum virile,’ would appear to be about equal in both difficulty and explanatory power.

There are two further arguments that, in my opinion at least, tip the balance strongly in favor of Hallett’s interpretation *\*mas-turbari*. The first argument concerns the *hapax legomenon*, *mascarpio*, used by Petronius. The sense of this word is not self-evident from its context. It is usually taken as a synonym of *masturbator* (so Walde - Hofmann, s. v.) but Hallett I think makes a good case for its being something like ‘hitting the membrum virile.’<sup>4</sup>) In form it is obviously to be

<sup>4</sup>) *Mascarpio* (actually the acc. sg. *mascarpionem*) occurs in Petronius’ *Satyricon* (134.5). It is in the midst of a longish section (128–140) that deals largely with the repeated attempts on the part of the narrator, Encolpius, to cure his impotence. In the scene we are concerned with he has been led by an old woman into the chamber of a priestess where he submits to a beating.

*Ac me iterum in cellam sacerdotis nihil recusantem perduxit impulitque super lectum, et harundinem ab ostio rapuit iterumque nihil respondentem mulcauit. Ac nisi primo ictu harundo quassata impetum uerberantis minuisset, forsitan etiam brachia mea caputque fregisset. Ingemui ego utique propter mascarpionem, lacrimisque ubertim manantibus [sic] obscuratum dextra caput super puluinum inclinaui.*

I append here Ernout’s French translation (1923: 163–164) to augment the renditions cited by Hallett (1976: 279, fn. 11).

“Puis elle me ramène, sans que je songe seulement à résister, dans la chambre de la prêtresse, me pousse sur le lit, se saisit du balai de derrière la porte, et se met à me battre sans que je me défende davantage. Et si le balai, en se brisant au premier coup, n’avait ralenti l’élan de mon bourreau, peut-être m’aurait-elle bien cassé bras et tête. Je ne pus m’empêcher de gémir, surtout quand je sentis son attouchement obscène; des torrents de larmes s’échappèrent de mes yeux, et cachant mon visage dans mes mains, je l’enfouis dans l’oreiller.”

Ernout’s “attouchement obscène” seems to straddle nicely the ambiguities of this passage.

segmented *mas* + *carpio*. Given Hallett's semantic analysis, this would be a transparent *nomen actionis* to a verb *\*mascarpere* 'to do damage to the *mas*.'<sup>5)</sup> The traditional analysis, which takes *mascarpio* as a *nomen agentis* equivalent to *masturbator*, is anything but transparent. The *mas-* must come from *masturbari* (and thus presupposes a popular analysis *mas-turbari*) but it is not clear why *mas* 'hand' + *carpere*, whichever of the many meanings of *carpere* we assign this compound (e.g., 'to pluck, to gather, to do damage to, to destroy'), should be the equivalent of *masturbari*. Clearly Hallett's hypothesis explains *mascarpio* more readily and neatly than the traditional one but the semantic ambiguity of *mascarpio* makes this word incapable of anything but a supporting role in a discussion of *masturbari*.

The second, more substantial, argument involves the relationship between the putative *mas* 'membrum virile' and *mas* 'male' (both noun and adjective). Certainly if there was a noun *mas* that meant 'membrum virile', one might reasonably expect a derived adjective meaning 'male.' One might compare Old English *wāpen* 'weapon, membrum virile' with its derived adjective *wāpned* 'male' or the Hittite *pešna-* 'man, male,' a derived adjective in *\*-no-* from the *\*pesos-* (n.) seen in Greek *πέος*, etc.<sup>6)</sup> The nominalization of an adjective such as *mas* 'male' to a noun 'a male' is, of course, commonplace. A trio exactly parallel to *\*mas* 'membrum virile,' *mas* 'male (adj.),' and *mas* 'male (noun)' is well-attested in *pubes* 'pubic hair,' *pubes* 'showing the outward signs of sexual maturity,' and *pubes* 'one capable of bearing arms' (i.e., 'one old enough to show the outward signs of sexual maturity'). I have recently discussed this latter trio (along with their cognates in other Indo-European languages [Adams, 1985 a]) and while that argument is fairly complex, the conclusions, insofar as they apply to Latin, are fairly easily summarized. Proto-Indo-European had a neuter noun *\*póums*<sup>7)</sup> 'pūbes, body hair, down' to which several derivatives might be formed, e.g., a "collective" feminine *\*péumos-*, with a weak grade *\*pums-*, whose meaning

<sup>5)</sup> The fact that we have a *nomen actionis* in *-ion-* rather than the productive *-tion-* might suggest that this is not a nonce form of Petronius but rather a word of some antiquity.

<sup>6)</sup> Latin *pēnis* (from *\*pesni-*) is a further derivative of *\*pesno-*, an *i*-stem abstract originally meaning *\*virility* which came, perhaps from euphemistic considerations, to be used in the place of *\*pesos-* 'membrum virile.' (m. Peters, p. c.)

<sup>7)</sup> I.e., *\*pou-ms-*, or perhaps *\*peu-ms-*, with the same formative seen in *\*mēms* 'meat' and the same root seen in *\*pu-lo-* 'a single hair (of the body).' See also Adams (1985 b).

was identical with that of the underlying neuter, and an adjective (also used as a masculine noun) *\*péumos-* (weak grade *\*pums-*) ‘(one) characterized by *\*poums*.’ Proto-Indo-European *\*poums* has disappeared in Latin but the derivatives survived, though much rebuilt, under the form of Latin *pubes*.<sup>8)</sup>

Thus, with the characteristic replacement of PIE *\*-o-* by pre-Latin *\*-e-* in the stem syllable in both of these families of words, we can reconstruct pre-Latin *\*poumes-* and *\*maes-/mas-*. Except that *\*poums-* left no trace of a weak stem (*\*p(o)ums-?*), these two groups of word were morphologically and semantically parallel, consisting in both cases of a feminine “collective” (‘X’), a derived adjective (‘characterized by X’), and a further derived noun (‘one characterized by X’). The feminine “collective,” *mas*, has disappeared from Latin except as the first member of the compound *masturbari*. The derived adjective and derived noun remain. They would have had a pre-Latin paradigm, *\*maes, maesem, mases*, regularly giving *mās, \*mārem, maris* after the operation of vowel contraction (see particularly Cowgill, 1973: 288–294) and rhotacism. The actually attested accusative singular, *marem* (and similarly the nominative plural *marēs*) would have its short vowel analogically; all the other *s*-stems that still show quantitative ablaut, or probably did in pre-Latin (cf. *pūbēs, pūberem, pūberis*, or *arbor* [from *\*arbōr* from *\*arbōs*], *arborem, arboris*), are characterized by a long vowel in the nominative singular and a short vowel elsewhere.

While *mas* with the meaning ‘membrum virile’ is not attested in Latin, the semantic and morphological parallels with *pubes* makes the hypothesis that such a meaning did occur at some stage of pre-Latin a reasonable one. That a word meaning ‘membrum virile’ should have been replaced by other terms, e. g., *mentula*,<sup>9)</sup> is not sur-

<sup>8)</sup> The *-b-* of the historic Latin words comes from the phonological conflation of the reflexes of these words with the phonologically regular reflex of PIE *\*pumro-*, another adjective meaning ‘characterized by *\*poums*.’ The original *-m-* is just perhaps to be seen in *pumilio* ‘dwarf.’ Given the typical hairiness of dwarves in folklore and the popular imagination (witness the otherwise very differently conceived dwarves of Disney and Tolkien), an analysis of *pumilio* as *pumi-l-ion-* ‘little hairy one’ seems at least as plausible as the more usual, in etymological circles, *pu-mi-l-ion-* with PIE *\*p(a)u-* ‘small’ and an unexplained *-m-* (so quite hesitantly, Walde-Hofmann). In either case one might compare *uespertilio* ‘bat’ from *uesper* ‘evening.’

<sup>9)</sup> Ernout - Meillet, Walde-Hofmann, and J. N. Adams all mention, only to reject, an etymological connection of this word with *menta* ‘spearmint stalk.’ Since the connection is an obvious one morphologically, I wonder if we cannot

prising—certainly the terms that were current in classical Latin (*mentula*, *penis*, *verpa*) showed themselves to be subject to replacement in the later Romance languages.

As to possible extra-Latin connections for *mas* ‘membrum virile,’ Hallett suggests that it is the reflex of PIE *\*mēms* (*\*mēEms*?) ‘flesh, meat.’ The semantic development offers no difficulties but such cannot be said of the phonological difficulties which appear to be insurmountable and so the connection is best abandoned.<sup>10</sup>) Walde-Hofmann (1965, II: 46), discussing the adjective *mas*, suggest that it derives from a root *\*mā-* ‘fließen, naß’ and that it shows the result of the same semantic development we see in Sanskrit *vṛṣan-* ‘male’ [: *várṣati* ‘it rains’] and Greek *ἄρσην* ‘male’ [: Sanskrit *arṣati* ‘it flows’]. Of course if the starting point for the development of the Latin forms was ‘membrum virile,’ this equation would not be particularly good semantically. Moreover, the evidence for a PIE *\*mā-* with this sense is extremely skimpy. Walde-Hofmann adduce Latin *mānō*, *mare*, and *madeō* with their cognates but all except *mānō* may be better explained in other ways and *mānō* is isolated except for a doubtful cognate in Celtic. Finally Eichner (1974), followed by Szemerényi (1977: 17), revives the notion first put forward by E. Leumann (1893) that *\*mas-* ‘male’ is reconstructable in Proto-Indo-European on the basis of Latin *mas* and Sanskrit *pumas-* ‘male’ (from *\*pu-* ‘little’ and *\*mas-* ‘male’). With relatively minor adjustments to Leumann’s hypothesis and some rather more major morphological adjustments to the history of *mas* sketched here, this theory would be compatible with our proposals concerning *mas* and *masturbari*. However, it is most unlikely to be correct. In neither Indic nor Iranian is the putative *\*mas-* found anywhere but in Sanskrit *pumas-*

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save it semantically by assuming that at some stage of pre-Latin *menta* meant simply ‘stalk.’ Certainly a *-tā-* derivative of PIE *\*men-* ‘project’ might well have meant ‘stalk.’ A diminutive, ‘little stalk,’ would then have been a likely candidate for transfer to a new meaning, ‘membrum virile.’ (Cf. Latin *caulis* ‘stalk,’ also *membrum virile*,’ J.N. Adams, 1982: 26.) We would then have only to assume that *menta* became semantically restricted in pre-Latin to ‘spearmint stalk.’

<sup>10</sup>) Hallett doesn’t discuss the phonological issues of her etymology (for which she gives credit to Puhvel) but if PIE *\*mēms* was actually *\*mēEms*, then we might have had a paradigm *\*mēEms/mEmsés* which would probably have produced a pre-Latin *\*mēs/manses*. Such a paradigm could, with generalization of the vocalism of the oblique and the consonantism of the nominative-accusative, have given *\*mās/mases*. Such a double remodeling, going in contrary directions, seems most unlikely to me.

nor is *\*pu-* to be seen except in the fixed *\*putlo-* ‘son’ of Indo-European date. The necessary basis, therefore, of a pre-Indic compound, *\*pu-mas-*, is not demonstrable. Secondly, the accent pattern seen in Sanskrit *púmān/pumsáh* is not that of a compound nor, since this “holokinetic” pattern is as moribund as can be in Sanskrit,<sup>11)</sup> is there any reason why an old compound reanalyzed as a simplex would have taken it up.<sup>12)</sup>

Thus, the status of *mas-turbari* aside, none of the etymological suggestions concerning *mas* is convincing. The way is open then to connect *mas* ‘membrum virile’ with OHG *mast* ‘pole, post, spear-shaft, mast’ (PIE *\*mazdo-*), Latin *mālus* ‘mast’ (with dialectal *-l-* from PIE *\*mazdo-*), Old Irish *matan* ‘club, cudgel’ (*\*mazdan-*), Middle Irish *maide* (*\*mazdio-*). I would propose that Proto-Indo-European (or at least its western dialects) had a neuter noun *\*méA(o)s* ‘pole, rod, etc.’ which also came to mean ‘membrum virile.’<sup>13)</sup> In its original meaning, ‘pole, rod, etc.’, *\*méA(o)s* tended to be replaced by a derivative, *\*mAz-do-*. In Latin both the simple and the extended stem forms survived, clearly differentiated as to meaning. In Germanic and Celtic only the extended *\*mAzdo-* is attested.

All this discussion leads us to conclude that Hallett’s basic hypothesis, when stripped of her irrelevant arguments and properly sup-

<sup>11)</sup> Otherwise only in *pánthāh/patháh*.

<sup>12)</sup> In accepting Leumann and Eichner’s etymology, Szemerényi tacitly abandons an earlier proposal of his (1962: 192–193) to derive Latin *mas* from PIE *\*manus* ‘man’ (cf. Sanskrit *manu-*, Germanic *\*manwan-*, etc.) by way of syncopation of the nominative singular *\*manus* to *\*mans* which would regularly give *mas*. Szemerényi considers the single form, *mas*, sufficient to motivate a new paradigm because of the ‘homonymie fâcheuse’ with *manus* ‘hand’ (whose nominative singular must also have undergone syncopation to *mas*). However, one must remember that the ‘homonymie’ was never total. As we have had occasion to note, *manu-* ‘hand’ had beside it in pre-Latin a consonant stem *man-* while *mas* ‘male’ (for Szemerényi *\*manu-*) had beside it *masculus* (for Szemerényi *\*manuskelo-*) from earliest times. If disambiguation was necessary, the means were already to hand without having to create a new paradigm. Likewise the homonymie was less ‘fâcheuse’ than it would appear just looking at the form of the two words, since the contexts in which ‘male’ and ‘hand’ would have appeared would have been largely non-overlapping and the two would, in any case, have been distinguished by gender.

<sup>13)</sup> Cf. *virga*, *vectis*, *\*caraculum*, etc. in Latin (J.N. Adams, 1982). In the case of *virga* the co-existence of the metaphorical ‘membrum virile’ and the non-metaphorical ‘rod, stick’ has lasted some two thousand years (cf. French *verge*). One might also note the same co-existence in meaning in English *yard*. Both the meanings ‘rod, stick’ and ‘membrum virile’ are obsolete in modern English but they existed side by side from the fourteenth century to the nineteenth.

ported by data from within Latin and from other closely related Indo-European languages, provides a semantically, morphologically, and phonologically satisfying etymology for *masturbari* as well as providing the basis for an unexpected insight into the history of another important Latin word, *mas*.

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