

USING WATER "UNCHASTEELY":
CICERO *PRO CAELIO* 34 AGAIN

JAMES L. BUTRICA

RECENTLY IN THIS JOURNAL,¹ Christer Bruun has proposed a new interpretation of the second of the rhetorical questions asked by Ap. Claudius in the celebrated *prosopopoeia* at Cicero *Pro Caelio* 34:

ideone ego pacem Pyrrhi diremi, ut tu amorum turpissimorum cotidie foedera ferires, ideo aquam adduxi, ut ea tu inceste uterere, ideo viam munivi, ut eam tu alienis viris comitata celebrares?

Did I destroy Pyrrhus' peace so that you might every day strike treaties involving the most loathesome love-affairs; did I bring in water so that you might use it unchastely; did I build a road so that you might crowd it surrounded by other women's husbands?

The commentators and translators cited by Bruun have seen an unspecific sexual reference here, but he argues that such a "vague general insinuation" is "not very satisfactory" (367); after considering some evidence from Frontinus about the illegal use of Rome's water supply by brothel-keepers, and speculating that washing in itself could have been seen as immoral, he proposes instead that Cicero "was referring to the commonly known possession of a water supply by some brothels in Rome, while at the same time implying that Clodia was a prostitute" (372). I suggest, however, that the connection between washing and love-making was sufficiently well established to make it unnecessary to have recourse to other explanations, and that if a less "vague" and "general" insinuation is desired, then one is available in the connection between *fellatio* and drinking water.

One might have thought that an explicitly sexual reference was assured by the fact that both of the other rhetorical questions—alluding to *amorum turpissimorum* . . . *foedera* and to Clodia's association with the husbands of other women—also convey insults concerning her sexual conduct. But for Bruun a sexual explanation "still does not answer our question," i.e., "What ambiguous or repulsive use of water is being alluded to with respect to Clodia?" He goes on to argue that "while washing ideally would follow after sexual intercourse, it is not really an act that is normally connected with intercourse or something that is considered an integral part of sexual activity" (365–366).

On the contrary: washing was indeed "an act that [was] normally connected with intercourse"; to judge by the evidence of Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, the connection

¹Bruun 1997: 364–373. I would like to acknowledge the helpful suggestions offered by the journal's reader.

was so natural that, in a sexually charged context, a mere reference to “taking water” could suggest intercourse. In the opening of Book 3, Ovid is trying to persuade women that in a sexually active life they have nothing to lose (3.90: *mille licet sumant, deperit inde nihil*, “though a thousand men partake, nothing is lost from it”) except the water they will “take,” presumably in douching afterwards (3.96: *quid, nisi quam sumes, dic mihi, perdis aquam?*, “tell me, what do you lose but the water you will take?”). This association between water and the aftermath of intercourse may be the reason why the woman to whom the impotent Ovid cannot make love in *Amores* 3.7 “takes water” to cover up her “shame” (84: *dedecus hoc sumpta dissimulavit aqua*, “she douched and concealed this disgrace”).² Hence a bare reference to using water, in a sexual context (remember that the Ciceronian passage is immediately preceded by the words *amorum turpissimorum*), can indeed suggest intercourse. *Incestus* and *inceste* can be applied to any kind of illicit sexuality,³ but one wonders whether Cicero is not in fact alluding specifically to the “incestuous” relationship between Clodia and her brother that he has already exploited to hilarious effect at *Cacl.* 32.⁴

But Martial points to another post-sexual use of water, most obviously in 2.50:

*quod fellas et aquam potas, nil, Lesbia, peccas.
qua tibi parte opus est, Lesbia, sumis aquam.*

Lesbia, you're doing nothing wrong in fellating and drinking water:
You're douching where you need it.

Whatever Lesbia's own reason for taking a drink after performing oral sex, Martial suggests that it is appropriate; i.e., she is using it not for douching but for

²“Taking water” as an idiom for “douching” is not, so far as I am aware, acknowledged in lexica (though the journal's reader reminds me that it has been incorporated into Peter Green's Penguin translation of *Ars am.* 3.96; at *Am.* 3.7.84, however, he has “splashed around with some water”); cf. also *Ars am.* 3.620: *sumendae detur cum tibi tempus aquae* (“when you're granted time for taking water”), in reference to a private time when a woman can elude observation (here Green offers, “when you're shut in the bathroom”). A search performed with the aid of the PHI disk suggests that the primary meaning of *aquam sumere* is “to draw water,” whether from a well (Plaut. *Mil.* 551–552) or a river (Naev. *Trag.* fr. 42) or the sea (Col. 12.21.4, 24.1) or a spring (Tib. 2.1.14) or various other sources (Frontin. *Aq.* 129.11: *ex iis fontibus, rivis, specibus, fornicibus aquam sumere*). This primary meaning and the specialized meaning “douche” form the basis of the word-play on *aquam sumere* in *Priap.* 30; someone who asks the god for directions to a spring (presumably in order to “draw water” from it) is told that the route lies through a vineyard, then is warned that if he/she plucks a single grape, *cur aliter sumas, hospes, habebis aquam* (4: “stranger, you'll have another reason to draw water”), i.e., for douching if the *hospes* is a woman, for washing the fundament if it is a boy, or for washing the mouth (after irrumation) if it is a man. The sense “drawing water” leads naturally into “drinking water” (Ov. *Rem.* 536; Hyg. *Fab.* 82.2) and also into “taking water,” sometimes for a recipe (Col. 12.1.3), more often as medication (Cels. 1.3.12; 3.15.1; 4.8.3; Scrib. *Comp.* 171); it is perhaps through this technical medical sense that the meaning “douche” arose.

³Cf. *TLL* 7.894.66–895.11: “latiore sensu de quolibet genere impudicitiae.”

⁴*quod quidem facerem vehementius, nisi intercederent mihi inimicitiae cum istius mulieris viro—fratrem volui dicere; semper hic erro* (“Which I would do more forcefully indeed were I not involved in hostilities with that woman's husband—brother, I meant; I'm always making blunders about this.”).

cleansing her mouth, surely to remove the tell-tale odour of smegma that could well be present after fellating an uncircumcised Roman male.⁵ It is even possible that the drinking of water was associated so regularly with *fellatores* and *fellatrices* that an allusion to oral sex could be created simply by a bare mention of it; at any rate, no other explanation seems likely for Martial 6.69:

*non miror quod potat aquam tua Bassa, Catulle:
miror quod Bassae filia potat aquam.*

Catullus, I'm not surprised that your Bassa drinks water:
I *am* surprised that Bassa's daughter drinks water.

The poet appears to be implying that Bassa's daughter, like her mother, is a *fellatrix*, and there is probably the further implication that Catullus is the object of her attentions.

None of what has been said here detracts from Bruun's erudition or, indeed, even shows that he is wrong in his suspicions; but I hope that I have shown that the "unclean" use of water in *Cael.* 34 can be understood in a way that is not only comprehensible but even quite effective without recourse to arguments based upon the misappropriation of water from Rome's aqueducts. Ovid shows that, in the right context, the mere mention of using water can suggest sexual intercourse, while Martial shows that it can specifically suggest *fellatio*.⁶ The need to preserve decorum in Cicero's representation of Ap. Claudius precluded a more specific reference, but this also suits Cicero's rhetorical strategy, since the unspecific *inceste* allows each member of the jury to conjure up his own image or images of what is sexually "unclean" (a reason why "vague general insinuation" can in fact be more effective rhetorically than explicitness). But I wonder whether Martial does not suggest that, for some ancient Roman readers at least, this passage of the *Pro Caelio* was regularly understood as referring to oral sex in particular. This would explain the otherwise curious coincidence that the water-drinking *fellatrix*

⁵Any residual odour of semen would surely be masked by the stronger odour of smegma. For the association between *fellatio* and residual smells, cf. Mart. 2.12 (the aroma of myrrh in Postumus' kisses rouses suspicion that he is covering up); 11.30 (*os male caudicis et dicis olere poetis: sed fellatori, Zoile, peius olet*, "Zoilus, you say that pleaders' and poets' mouths smell bad, but a *fellator's* smells worse"); 11.95 (*incideris quotiens in basia fellatorum, in solium puta te mergere, Flacce, caput*, "Flaccus, whenever you encounter the kisses of *fellatores*, imagine that you're sinking your head into a wash-tub"; for *solium*, Shackleton Bailey [1993: 3.319–320] prefers to read either Bodel's *lasanum* or his own conjecture *trullam*, perhaps needlessly: the *fellator's* mouth can be regarded as a vessel in which the tongue and saliva scrub clean whatever filthy object has been inserted). Odour may be a reason (though not the only one) why a social kiss from a *Gallus recens* (not to mention a hundred *cunnilingi*) is considered less revolting than a winter-time kiss from Linus at Mart. 7.95.15; for the connection between *Galli* and *fellatio*, cf. Mart. 3.81 and especially the "swarming" scene at Apul. *Met.* 8.29: *passimque circumfusi nudatum supinatumque iuvenem execrandis oribus flagitabant*.

⁶The association is not exclusively ancient, of course; a commentary on the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal contained within a "Saturday Night Live" sketch first broadcast in the fall of 1998 suggested that the scandal would reduce the American people to the condition of Ms Lewinsky herself: "We will all be on our knees, asking Betty Currie for a glass of water and a Tic-Tac."

of Martial 2.50 shares her name “Lesbia” with Clodia’s Catullan *persona*, while the man who is apparently fellated in 6.69 is none other than a “Catullus.”⁷

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS
MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY OF NEWFOUNDLAND
ST. JOHN’S, NEWFOUNDLAND
A1C 5S7

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bruun, C. 1997. “Water for Roman Brothels: Cicero *Cael.* 34,” *Phoenix* 51: 364–373.
Dover, K. J. 1978. *Greek Homosexuality*. Cambridge, Mass.
Shackleton Bailey, D. R. ed. and tr. 1993. *Martial* Epigrams. 3 vols. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Mass. and London.

⁷The association between women from Lesbos and *fellatio* might also be relevant here for both Cicero and Catullus; cf. Dover 1978: 182.