

Tiberius on Capri and the Limits of Roman Sex Culture

BILL GLADHILL
McGill University
charles.gladhill@mcgill.ca

This paper examines Suetonius' representation of Tiberius and sex on Capri at *Vita Tiberii* 43-44. Tiberian sex requires neologisms (*sellaria*, *spintria*) to define it; ancient paintings and obscure books are collected to give it shape and form; herds of prostitutes (*greges*) from everywhere (*undique*) are gathered to perform it; dehumanized children (*pisciculi*, *Panisci*) are fundamental to its articulation. While this passage is famously notorious, it has been relatively understudied, apart from discussions of certain lexical and sexual cruces¹. Surely, Tiberius' philhellenism and inclination to the obscure explain some of Suetonius' material². Likewise, brothels, erotic art and Roman elite gardens illuminate certain aspects of the narrative³. However, these various aspects do not sufficiently quantify the disturbing horror of Suetonius' *Caprineum*. The emperor's gravitational force is so great that it creates a sexual event horizon; nearly

1 — See, most notably, Hallett 1978, Clarke 1993: 287-88, Champlin 2010, and Hallett 2018. Scholars gesture to the passage in passing, of course, but extended exegesis (let alone translation) is generally avoided.

2 — Pollitt 1978:167-68, Houston 1989: 189-90, Rutledge 2008: 461-63.

3 — Clarke 1998, Bartman 2002, Newby 2012: 352.

every structuring category that might delineate and demarcate Roman sexuality is distorted, obscured and blurred⁴. Bodies are controlled and transformed. New functions and constructions of human embodiment are conceived. States of being become iterative replications of images imprinted in paint or on stone. Children become little fishes or hybrid, hooved deities or woodland goddesses. Normative stages and transitions of human development are obliterated and replaced by an assemblage of activity that orbits the sexual organs of the emperor. Tiberius transforms traditional Roman sex culture and assembles an admixture of extreme and complex performances of a particularly disruptive and corrosive sexuality that confounds categories and frameworks. While Suetonius imprints Tiberius with sinister Priapic elements, effectively aligning him with the god, many other features of the narrative mark the moment when sex becomes an instantiation of *nefas* and horror.

Arguably, the closest approximation to this episode is the copulating Pan/goat statue found in the Villa of the papyri in 1752. Rustic god and domesticated animal unite. The sexualized focalization shifts from the animal's perspective to the god's and back. The legs, hips, arms and bodies of the sculpture obscure sight lines from the act of penetration. One *must* become a voyeur to look at it wholly (and most likely correctly). What do we see? Pan merges with a goat, which then blends with the god. They become a unified whole. Although, human sex marks the compositional structure. The missionary position is only performed by humans and some primates. Bestiality, zoophilia, theophilia merge, each accorded its own scopophilia, while wholly replete with human signifiers. The image stresses that discourses of sex and power, penetrated and penetrator, hierarchies and binaries, active and passive, all dissolve during the mutual expression of pleasure and desire during sex. Even god and animal conflate during its performance⁵. Sections *Tib.* 43-44 function similarly; the passage requires a voyeuristic investigation of the sexual imagery in order to view fully Suetonius' compositional techniques. But in Suetonius' telling, the organizational framework of sex on Capri moves contrary to the statue; human beings undergo a profound structural atomization. Dehumanization and monstrous configurations are central features of these passages.

Section 43 begins:

4 — See Varner 2008.

5 — The sculpture seems to move in and through a cluster of paintings also in the gabinetto segreto that depict a kind of Pan-sexuality, where the goat-god attempts to seduce or rape nymphs in pastoral landscapes, or where the demigod Hermaphroditus entices a seemingly bashful and reluctant Pan (or satyr) to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. On these images see Von Stackelberg 2014: 406-7.

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.

In his retreat at Capri, he also contrived *sellaria*, a place for arcane sexual pleasures, where from all around (*undique*) were collected flocks of girls and grown male prostitutes (*exoleti*) and the inventors of preternatural sex acts, whom he called *spintriae* – interlocked in a threefold series – and in turn they defiled each other before him presence so that by the sight of them he may stiffen his diminishing desires.

The verb *excogitare* is marked in the Suetonian corpus, meaning to think of something novel and radical, to devise, to invent. It hardly ever has a positive sense⁶. The verb describes Caligula's new and unheard-of spectacle (*nouum praeterea atque inauditum genus spectaculi excogitavit*, *Cal.* 19.1), in which the emperor spans a bridge across the Bay of Naples in imitation of Xerxes' crossing of the Hellespont. Caligula (*Cal.* 22.4) also erected a temple and established a cult to himself with *hostiae excogitativissae* (newly invented sacrificial victims), which included *phoenicopteri* (flamingos), *pauones* (peacocks), *tetraones* (moor fowls), *numidicae* (hens), *meleagrides* (guinea hens), and *phasianaes* (pheasants). Suetonius also uses this verb to describe how Nero dressed in animal skins and attacked the genitals of his restrained victims – imitating the activity of Roman gladiatorial spectacles, until his freedman Doryphorus (the spear bearer) would “dispatch” him (*Nero* 29.1). *Excogitare* is the verb used of invention and the radical innovation of something never before witnessed. Unlike Caligula's or Nero's radical innovations – their avian sacrifices, bizarre *pompa* over a symbolically charged bridge or the amalgamation of gladiatorial *ludi* with sexually explicit *mime* – Tiberius' inventiveness wholly reconstructs and reconfigures Roman sexuality itself.

The object of *excogitare* is the neologism *sellaria*, used first here and then by Pliny and Tacitus⁷. While there has been considerable debate over the precise meaning of the word (latrines, brothel), Suetonius himself offers a stipulative definition: *sedes arcanarum libidinum*, a place for arcane and mysterious *libidines*. The *sellaria* effectively function as experimental seating spaces where *puellae* (female prostitutes), *exoleti* (male

6 — Two examples incline positively. At *vita Augusti* 37 Augustus *nova officia excogitavit* including *cura operum publicorum, viarum, aquarum, alvei Tiberis, frumenti populo dividundi, praefectura urbis, triumviratus legendi senatus*. At *vita Neronis* 16 Suetonius states (perhaps ironically) that *formam aedificiorum urbis novam excogitavit et ut ante insulas ac domos porticus essent, de quarum solaris incendia arcerentur; easque sumptu suo extruxit*.

7 — On *sellaria* and *spintria* see the study of Champlin 2011.

prostitutes) and the Einsteins of monstrous sex culture (*monstrousi concubitus repertores*), the *spintriae*, perform novel sex acts. The *spintriae* are the ground zero of the *sellaria*, where their inventiveness comes to demarcate the precise contours of the *arcanae libidines*⁸. The noun *repertor* situates them among a long list of “founders” and “inventors” of culturally civilizing productions⁹. The phrase *monstrous concubitus*, however, suggests that their marked innovations accord more with the inventions of Sejanus (*facinora omnia*; Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.11) than with those of Bacchus and Apollo.

The phrase *monstrous concubitus* is a rare collocation, occurring only one other time in Pomponius Porphyrio’s commentary on Horace, *Epode* 5.4,1 where Folia, “of masculine desire”, is participating in the ritual starvation of a boy in order to prepare a philter (*non defuisse masculae libidinis/ Ariminensem Foliam...*). In clear reference to Suetonius, Pomponius states, *quod ait autem masculae libidinis, ad id pertinent quod dicantur mulieres habere e natura[m] monstrosae libidinis concubitum <cum> feminis. Quo crimine etiam Sappho male audiit* (“moreover he meant this by masculine desire, women incline to that when they are said to have sex with women deriving from the nature of a monstrous desire. Even Sappho has a bad reputation because of this accusation”). Acro elaborates on Pomponius here by saying that *huiusmodi autem feminae hermafroditae dicuntur* (“moreover, women of this kind are called hermaphrodites”). Pomponius effectively conflates a circumlocution for lesbianism, *masculina libido*, with the behavior of Tiberius’ *spintriae*. Acro adds hermaphrodites to the equation. Pomponius’ expression of lesbianism in Suetonian terms is hardly helpful in assessing the precise nature of the monstrous sex acts of the *spintriae*. It merely reveals Pomponius’ estimation of it. Acro leaves us even worse off.

Until recently *spintria* was thought to be a Latin calque of the Greek *sphinktēr*. The noun *sphinktēr* means a tight bind or band, or the tight muscle enclosing an opening of the body. The internal and external sphincters are surely meant. Greek uses the term σφιγκτής to describe a male prostitute and is often equated to the κίταιδος (booty-shaker), that sort of hobgoblin of overflowing sexual desire and uncontrolled licentiousness found in largely invective and defamatory texts. But Edward Champlin has rightly argued that the noun derives from *spinter* (*spinther*), a bracelet or armlet (*armillae genus*) that, according to Festus (333M),

8 — On the location of “pornographic” paintings in domestic spaces and public baths see Clarke 1998: 145-240 and Strong 2016: 118-41.

9 — For example, *Liberi patri, repertori vitis* (Varro, *RR* 1.2.19), *repertorem medicinae* (of Aesculapius; Vergil, *Aen.* 7.758), *hominum et rerumque repertor* (of Jupiter; Vergil, *Aen.* 12.829); *carminis et medicae, Phoebe, repertor opis* (Ovid, *RA* 76), *Seianus facinorum omnium repertor* (Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.11). Many more relevant instances could be added.

mulieres antiquae were accustomed to wear on their left arm (*brachio summo sinistro*)¹⁰. Champlin suggests that *spintriae*, meaning “bracelet workers”, cover men and women who provided the same service as an armlet, “binding and compressing not his arm but his penis, be it orally, vaginally, or anally”, and that “[T]hey 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”. Much of Champlin’s analysis is correct. However, his reading of the passage conflates the *spintriae* with the *puellae* and *exoleti*: “a proper translation of Suet. *Tib.* 43 should read... ‘there select teams of girls and mature catamites, along with inventors of deviant intercourse, all of whom he dubbed “bracelet workers” copulated before him...’”¹¹. The antecedent of *quos* here must strictly be limited to *repertores*, and not extended to *puellae* and *exoleti*, as Champlin takes it. Champlin’s reading actually results in an added question; if *spintriae* include the *puellae* and *exoleti*, then whom is Suetonius describing as *repertores*? How do they fit within the *sellaria*? Essentially, there is a new class of sex workers known as the *repertores monstrosi concubitus* who require elucidation. It seems more appropriate though that the force of the relative here delimits the *spintriae* alone. The sentence emphasizes their profound, innovative sexual productivity.

There is another issue with Champlin’s good analysis. Simply put, his definition of *spintria* signifies nothing new in terms of Roman sex culture that is not already covered by the words *puellae* and *exoleti* (not to mention the *cinaedus* and σφιγκτής). There would be no need for the neologism in this case. On the *exoletus* Williams states that “the term denoted a male prostitute past the age of adolescence, who might well be called upon to play the insertive role in penetrative acts with his male clients, but who might just as well also play the receptive role. His distinctive feature was not his sexual specialty, but rather his age, although sometimes even that was not a definitive characteristic...”¹². Williams’ understanding of the sexual aptitude of the *exoletus* covers the same range of sexual openness as Champlin’s *spintria*. Yet, Williams thinks that the *exoletus* penetrates the *spintria* who then penetrates the *puella*, which is a reasonable view based on Suetonius’ *triplici serie conexi*. But given the open-ended penetrative and insertive potentiality of the *exoletus*, such a threesome could surely be performed without mention of the *spintriae*. Male-male-female *ménage à trois* is not an uncommon scenario in Roman erotic wall painting. Yet, Suetonius’ language is so strong (and novel),

10 — Champlin 2011: 327.

11 — Champlin 2011: 327.

12 — Williams 2010: 92.

that it is difficult to imagine that the sex acts described here were simply the literary representation of such paintings¹³. In addition, for Champlin the *spintriae* were a system of squeezing orifices, an idea already built into *sphinkter* and the σφίγκτης, words, which had previously obfuscated the meaning of *spintriae* for so long¹⁴.

Champlin's translation of *spintriae* as "bracelet workers" does point in the right direction, allowing, on the one hand, to understand the noun's connection to *spinter*, while, on the other hand, to distinguish it from *exoletus*. Surely, the sexual range of the *spintriae* imagined by Champlin and Williams goes without saying. Even to define the range distorts Suetonius' imagery. Richlin's "sexual acrobats" properly covers their sexual expansiveness, but I would like to push Suetonius' material to its limit¹⁵. Just as an *anulus* becomes a ring when a finger is inserted into it, a *spinter* becomes a bracelet when it is slipped onto the arm. I think we are to imagine that the *spintriae* penetrate (and can be penetrated) anally and vaginally, men and women, with their fists and wrists (in addition to their remaining penetrative potential). The *spintriae* literally become "bracelet workers" and they make their lovers (and are made) into "bracelets". They essentially wear the bodies of the penetrated (and can be worn) like human jewelry. Such a reading disambiguates the various sexual activities of the characters in the *sellaria*, while also giving a more nuanced image to *triplici serie conexi* and to *monstrosus concubitus*. When Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.1) states *tuncque primum ignota antea vocabula reperta sunt sellariorum et spintriarum ex foeditate loci et multiplici patientia* ("and then for the first time never before known words, *sellarii* and *spintriae*, were invented from the foulness of the place and the multiplex submissiveness"), he suggests that the words derive from *foeditas loci* and *multiplex patientia*. It could very well be the case that Tacitus here in his use of *foeditas* is referring directly to the anal cavity and *multiplex patientia* to double and triple penetrations of it¹⁶. The primary aversion Suetonius and Tacitus have against the *spintriae* is their innovative control and management of the rectal canal. Judith Hallett's translation of *spintriae* as "fundamentalists" captures the sense exactly¹⁷. Suetonius and Tacitus do not reveal the mysteries of the *arcanae libidines* in the *sellaria*. This is the subtle genius of this passage. Two ambiguous neologisms are offered without the necessary lexical or contextual information to know the precise nature of these orgies. An unending chain of sexual activity can be imagined without any

13 — Williams 2010: 347n108.

14 — Champlin 2011.

15 — Richlin 1992: 89.

16 — On the corporality of *foeditas* see Gladhill 2016: 49-61.

17 — Hallett 2018: 409.

clear delineations and demarcations as to its composition. This is a clear instance where less is more.

The sexual potentiality Suetonius creates in this passage is powerfully limitless. However, sexual performance may not be the overriding organizational framework here. To this end, the issue of the age of the *spintriae* becomes relevant. Williams emphasizes age in defining the *exoletus* (see above). Champlin, too, largely based on a smattering of references in Tacitus and Suetonius (in particular, *Vit.* 3.2), suggests that the age of the *spintriae* is paramount¹⁸. The underlying organizational structure within the *sellaria* is age (not sexual activity). Just as the *exoleti* are marked by their maturity, the *spintriae* are marked out as *children*, perhaps even from noble families¹⁹. Suetonius is stating that *puellae* (young women), *exoleti* (men) and *spintriae* (children) were interlocked, as the old, flaccid Tiberius hoped to stiffen his diminishing desire (*ut aspectu deficientis libidines excitaret*). The most disturbing implication of Tiberius' *spintriae* is the confluence of their age with their innovative, sexual agency (*repertores*) performed in the *sellaria*. The term *deliciae* shaped the discourse around the sexual availability of slave children²⁰. The *spintriae* fall so widely outside this discourse that their sexual agency becomes “monstrous”. They are likely free born (if not of noble parentage). They are emphatically sexualized as adult prostitutes orbit their monstrously erotic inventiveness. The passage inclines more towards horror than it does sexuality. The *spintriae* represent the first of a series of dehumanizations inflicted on children in the *Villa Iovis*.

Suetonius then continues to describe how Tiberius organized the *cubacula* (rooms) of the *Villa Iovis*. The passage is as follows:

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.

Rooms arranged in different ways he adorned with painted tablets and figurines of the most lascivious images and statues, and he equipped them with the books of Elephantis so that for the performance of sexual deeds an example of a desired sex position might be available for anyone.

While the *sellaria* exhibited live action, experimental sex, informed largely by the *repertores* housed there, the emperor also constructed a mimetic space in which material artifacts and the representations of

18 — *Pueritiam primamque adulescentiam Capreis egit inter Tiberiana scorta, et ipse perpetuo spintriae cognomine notatus existimatusque corporis gratia initium et causa incrementorum patri fuisse.*

19 — Champlin 2011: 328.

20 — On *deliciae* see Richlin 2018.

sexual positions in the books of Elephantis were located for consultation. The rooms employed different types of visual experiences, as the “static” images of the *tabulae* could be cross-referenced with the kinetic movement of the figurines, both of which could be reread and interpreted through the words of Elephantis²¹. These were spaces of recursive, reperformance where images expressed in objects or ink – themselves copies of copies of prior sexual monuments – were made flesh in repetitive replication of the source material, akin to an ever-present instantiation of Pygmalion’s scopophilia²². Images and representations came to life, as sexual experiences moved in and through iconographic, visual records and texts. While the *sellaria* contained novel experimentation, the *cubicula* functioned as databases of erotica.

The books of Elephantis in particular capture the fractal sexual system within these *cubicula*. The name Elephantis became attached to a number of works in antiquity on cosmetics, gynecology and sex, but her name continues to be one of the great and frustrating mysteries of antiquity. Any discussion of her must contend with the lacunae of evidence²³. It is likely that a number of texts on a wide array of topics related to women’s health, erotic poetry, cosmetics and sex were in circulation, and some of these works were attributed to Elephantis, who became a sort of umbrella authoress. Either Elephantis was the author of these texts or she represents a pseudonym (perhaps masking a male author). At some point “Elephantis” became a book. However, the ascription of books to Elephantis somewhat obscures the process of the transmission of knowledge. It seems more reasonable to construe her as a form of traditional, orally transferred knowledge on gynecology and sex, transmitted from courtesan to courtesan over time and space through the movement of prostitutes across the Mediterranean. I follow here Laurel Bowman’s 2004 study that reframed Marilyn Skinner’s important argument of a female poetic subculture. Bowman suggests that women’s songs did not exist apart from other traditions (male in this case), but were rather informed by and influenced these traditions²⁴. Elephantis represents one strand of this highly dynamic, non-literary or sub-literary system condi-

21 — On the differences between viewing painting and sculpture see Martin 1978. The *sigilla* could also represent terracotta relief images.

22 — On the use of (hypothetical) pattern books for the creation of erotic painting see Fredrick 1995: 277-80. A similar model ought to be offered for the tablets and figurines in the *cubicula*, while the books of Elephantis too are a product of copying.

23 — On Elephantis (and other women authors) see Tsantsanoglou 1973, Becatti 1975: 49-53, Parker 1989, Ingelmo 1990, Parker 1992, Holzberg 2006, Flemming 2007, Parker 2012 and Boehringer 2018 (with bibliography therein).

24 — See also López-Ruiz 2010, who makes a strong case that the Near Eastern elements in Hesiod’s cosmogony are a function of the cross-cultural transmission of knowledge through slavery, human trafficking and culture contact.

tioned on orally transmitted themes, topics and ideas between and among prostitutes.

Suetonius himself even gestures to this process of human movement and knowledge exchange when he states that Tiberius collected herds (*greges*) of sex-actors *undique*. It is difficult to know the range of distance implied in the adverb. Surely it extends beyond Capri. Should it be limited to Italy, or rather extended to include the entire Mediterranean? Given the proximity of Capri to one of the busiest trading nodes in the Bay of Naples, it is likely that *undique* reflects the geographically diverse range of commodities (including human traffic) being imported into Campania and subsequently to the emperor. These individuals brought their own culturally, embedded knowledge of sex and erotica along with their own orally transmitted traditions, which were then added to a tradition that had become visualized and textual in the *cubicula*. Behind the books of Elephantis are centuries of knowledge shared among prostitutes. Just as the images in the *cubicula* mimicked prior images, which monumentalized prior sex acts, that then became models for live re-performance, the books of Elephantis echo the lost traditions of slave prostitutes and courtesans.

Priapea 4 produces some of the best evidence for this “Elephantine” tradition that informs the *cubicula* in the *Villa Iovis*:

Obscaenas rigido deo tabellas dicans ex Elephantidos libellis dat
donum Lalage rogatque, temptes, si pictas opus edat ad figuras.

As she dedicates naughty paintings from the books of Elephantis to the rock hard god, Lalage gives a gift and asks that you should ravage her if she would produce a work like the positions pictured.

Lalage, while dedicating obscene *tabellae* (in this case, painted votive offerings) to Priapus from the books of Elephantis, she asks the god to ravage her if she might produce a live action production (*opus*) like the images pictured²⁵. The poem exhibits the same mimetic system as the *cubicula*, as the books of Elephantis produce a reproduction that then becomes the template for the sexual mimesis between Lalage and Priapus, again replicating the very tradition of Elephantis. Even the name Lalage

25 — It is generally accepted that the books of Elephantis contained images. There simply is not the evidence to assert this in total confidence. *Priapea* 4 is often read as proof of this argument. How do we interpret *tabellas... ex Elephantidos libris*? Are we to imagine that Lalage unrolled the papyrus and cut out the images and then dedicated these to Priapus, thereby ruining the book roll(s)? Or does Lalage copy an image from the books? If this is the case (and it seems likely), Lalage surely could have painted the image using Elephantis’ words (ecphrasis) as a guide. The evidence is largely equivocal (even words like *figurae* and *schemata* can be used for literary descriptions). On a different note, there is an argument that Roman erotic art represents the most important evidence for the material outlined in the books of Elephantis. The books of Elephantis ought to be in the forefront of discussions on intermediality.

(“Lalalalalala girl”) comes to personify the tradition, as she moves from Horace, through Catullus to Sappho (*dulce ridentem Lalagen amabo, / dulce loquentem*, *Odes* 1.22.23-4), while the verb λαλαγέω means “echo” at *AP* 6.54.9 where Paulus Silentiarius describes a cicada which leapt upon Eunomos’ broken lyre and adapted its chirping to the *nomos*, “echoing” the rustic song of the woods (*lalageusan... akhō*). Martial (12.43.1-4) too seems to gesture to a similar idea:

Facundos mihi de libidinosi
legisti nimium, Sabelle, versus,
quales nec Didymi sciunt puellae
nec molles Elephantidos libelli.

My eloquent verses about sex
You read too much, Sabellus, verses
like neither Didymus’ girls know
nor the soft books of Elephantis.

He aligns what the girls of Didymus know with the books of Elephantis. Living oral tradition moves in parallel with and echoes the written content.

The trade networks that brought the ivory statue of Lakshmi (?) to Pompeii (now in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples) and Roman gold coins to India represent the same routes and trade systems along which moved humans and their traditions back and forth from India through Egypt and Asia into Greece, North Africa, Italy and wider Europe²⁶. In this way, Tiberius on Capri shows a sort of imperial connoisseurship of ancient sex cultures. He not only imported from all over

26 — Schmitthenner 1979: 95 remarks that this statue was one of many Indian pieces that must have made their way to Pompeii and Italy. See also Singh 1988: 142-3 for a full discussion of the statue (either of Lakshmi or a courtesan). On trade among Greece, Rome and India see Sewell 1904, Filliozat 1949, Rawlinson 1971, Jong 1973, Schmitthenner 1979, Sedlar 1980, Gorelick and Gwinnett 1988, Singh 1988, Cimino 1994, Vassiliades 2000, Young 2001: 25-8, Millar 2006: 300-27, Parker 2008: 147-202, McLaughlin 2010, Fitzpatrick 2011. Could these books of Elephantis also originate from India? It becomes tantalizingly possible that Tiberius had obtained texts, which share in the same tradition as the Kama Sutra (I am not suggesting that they were a Greek version of the Kama Sutra). On this potentiality see Brendel 1970: 63-9 and Clarke 1998: 245-47 (following Brendel). To quote Clarke (246): “[T]he fact that the Kama Sutra, a sophisticated Sanskrit text from the Gupta period (A.D. 320-540) attributed to Vātsyāyana, is itself a collection and revision of earlier texts makes it a highly suggestive parallel for the Hellenistic and Roman world”. The Kama Sutra, as we have it today, was most likely compiled in the 3rd century CE, but it is essentially a collection of different texts in circulation from 400 BCE and after. Vatsyayana mentions 10 authorities that informed his work, beginning with Nandi, the servant of Shiva, and then lists 9 individuals, the first of whom, Shvetaketu, can be dated to the 6th C. BCE (See Haksar 2012: 201-3 for the dating and chronology of the tradition). It is clear that Vatsyayana fixed a text out of a “floating mass of traditional material” (see De 1969: 94. See also Bhattacharyya 1975: 69-75). Clarke’s statement that the Kama Sutra represents “a highly suggestive parallel” to Elephantis’ *libri* invites an opportunity to research the transmission of sex cultures in the ancient world.

the empire particularly experienced and inventive sex workers, but he also collected sexually explicit iconography and sex manuals, which had made their way to Rome from the furthest limits of the empire, and incorporated them into the *cubicula*, essentially creating a pan-Mediterranean reference library of sex.

In the same vein, Suetonius states that instead of an exorbitant amount of money, Tiberius chose a painting by the celebrated Ephesian painter Parrhasius, in which the huntress Atalanta was depicted fellating Meleager (or each participating in mutual oral gratification, if we follow Judith Hallett's analysis), and hung it in his bedroom²⁷:

Quare Parrasi quoque tabulam, in qua Meleagro Atalanta ore morigeratur, legatam sibi sub condicione, ut si argumento offenderetur decies pro ea sestertium acciperet, non modo praetulit, sed et in cubiculo dedicavit.

In fact, a painting by Parrhasius, in which Atalanta is fellating Meleager, was bequeathed to Tiberius under one condition, that if he were offended by the subject matter, he would accept a million sesterces in place of it. Not only did he prefer it, but he dedicated it in his bed room.

If this were an original work of Parrhasius (surely Suetonius assumes it was), it would have been nearly 400 years old. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that this was one of the first Greek pornographic (non-vase) paintings. The painting of Parrhasius, which Suetonius links to the books of Elephantis and the assortment of prostitutes collected from around the empire, also represents Tiberius' sexual connoisseurship, which moves through paint, to words and then bodies.

The painting's value to Tiberius is emphasized not only by its price, but also by Suetonius' use of the verb *dedicavit*. Suetonius uses the verb 27 times in his *vitae* and once in his fragments. Nearly every usage describes the dedication of religiously charged statues or votive offerings²⁸, *ludi*²⁹, and temples and altars³⁰. Only a few instances loosely fall outside of these categories³¹. Tiberius' dedication of the pornographic *tabula* becomes all the more marked in relation to the variety of other dedications made by the other emperors in Suetonius' works. Nearly all are religiously charged, and certainly the vast majority inclines towards a public, dedicatory display. Suetonius invites the reader to view Tiberius' dedication through

27 — Hallett 1978.

28 — *Iul.* 62.1, *Aug.* 31.5, 52.1, 57.1, *Cal.* 7.1, *Nero* 46.1, *Gal.* 18.2: of a *monile*, *Vit.* 10.3: of a *pugio*, *Vit.* 13.2: of a *patina*, called the shield of Minerva because of its size, *Tit.* 2.1.

29 — *Aug.* 43.5, *Cal.* 30.1: in relation to his bridge in the Bay of Naples, *Cl.* 21.1, *Ves.* 19.1, *Tit.* 7.3.

30 — *Aug.* 57.1, 94.8, *Tib.* 20.1, 40.1, *Cl.* 2.1, *Nero* 38.2, *frag.* 178.6.

31 — *Tib.* 70.2: of authors' busts in public libraries; 74.1: of his inability to dedicate a statue in a dream; *Nero* 12.3: of baths and gymnasia, 31.2: of the *domus aurea*.

this lens. This pornographic image is a sacred object, dedicated to a sacred place, yet the image itself – and its reperformative potential (if Tiberius' *cubiculum* can be analogized with the other rooms in the *villa*) – depicts an *os impurum* of at least one mythic hero³².

That Tiberius expressly dedicates the painting in his bedroom, rather than in any number of other suitable rooms in the *Villa Iovis*, suggests an affinity for Parrhasius beyond just the implication that Tiberius, like Meleager, may enjoy performing cunnilingus. Seneca the elder at *controversiae* 10.4.25 gestures to a painting by Parrhasius, depicting a tortured Prometheus. When Philip was selling Olynthian captives into slavery, Parrhasius bought a particularly aged man. The painter tortured him (*torsit*) and then used him as the model (*exemplar*) of the painted Prometheus. The old Olynthian died and Parrhasius dedicated the *tabula* in the Parthenon (*in templo Minervae*). The *controversia* focuses on whether or not the dedication was sacrilegious, stained with the pollution of the tortured man. Suetonius' Tiberius appears to be in conversation with the *controversia*. He dedicates something that depicts the physical representation of the *os impurum* by an artist whose creative activity operates almost as a template for Tiberius' own creative innovations.

While the other passages discussed show a tendency towards an almost artistic and imperialistic exploration and creation of a new sort of sex culture in which various media (mime, statuary, painting, literature) are brought together in a single space freed from the push and pull of normative Roman social and cultural restraints, the *pisciculi* episode is the most disturbing and horrific passage in ancient literature. It tests the limits of literary analysis³³. The narrative, though, expresses in stark terms the limits of our own assessment of Roman sexuality, while revealing the systems that allow this narrative to have any kind of coherence.

Suetonius states:

Maiore adhuc ac turpiore infamia flagavit, vix ut referri audirive, nedum credi fas sit, quasi pueros primae teneritudinis, quos pisciculos vocabat, institueret, ut natanti sibi inter femina versarentur ac luderent lingua morsuque sensim adpetentes; atque etiam quasi infantes firmiores, necdum tamen lacte depulsos, inguini ceu papillae admoveret, pronior sane ad id genus libidinis et natura et aetate.

Still with a greater and more base infamy was he enflamed that it is hardly appropriate to be discussed or heard let alone to be believed, as if he were raising boys of the tenderest age, whom he called *pisciculi* (little fishes), to turn about and play between his thighs as he swam, gently

32 — On the *os impurum* see Richlin 1992: 26-31.

33 — Hallett 1978: 198, Augoustakis 2014: 214-15, Hallett 2018 are marked exceptions.

grasping at him with their tongues and nibbles. And even as the children became stronger, though not yet weaned from breast milk, he would bring them to his genitals as though to a nipple, clearly being more prone to this kind of desire both because of their nature and age.

How do we approach this material after we set aside our revulsion? Suetonius has organized the passage around a contorted, inverted and distorted pederastic alignment. The youths are *deliciae*, swimming between Tiberius' thighs, as they nip and kiss his genitals³⁴. Suetonius is gesturing to intercrural sex, which was a common form of intimacy between the elder male and his younger consort. Intercrural sex allowed for the boy to remain unpenetrated and intact. By using the form *femina* rather than *femura*, which results in a homophonic echo between *femina* (thighs) and *femina* (woman), Suetonius suggests that Tiberius corresponds to a quasi-feminine sexual passivity³⁵. Yet the pederastic distortion continues, as the little fishes, in fact, become swimming *phalloi*, and the emperor himself becomes analogized to the young *eromenos*. The boys' bodies are analogized to the penis of a grown man. One even wonders if the size of the swimming boys represents a Priapic magnitude³⁶. In addition, Tiberius starts weaning children for this sort of behavior at an early age during their infancy. This passage constructs Tiberius as a kind of motherly Frankenstein. His penis replaces the mothers' nipples, and if we follow the analogy in the direction Suetonius pushes, his semen replaces mothers' milk³⁷. This passage illustrates a Tiberius that inhabits both a woman's sexual and maternal characteristics. The entire passage moves in and through Roman pederastic systems, while simultaneously unraveling their dynamics from the inside out, turning the older man into the boy, then a woman and a mother, while the boys become inseminated *mentula*. In so doing, the boys themselves lose their speciation, as they no longer retain their humanity, becoming just "little fishes", and Tiberius is loosened from his imperial Priapic status to become something wholly outside any system within Roman sex culture. This is a representation of chaos *vis-à-vis* Roman sex³⁸.

Tiberius on Capri inclines to the effacement of any human standard of interpretation and analysis. When we follow Suetonius' sight lines, a

34 — On *deliciae* and this passage in particular see Richlin 2018. It is possible that they would eventually become the *spintriae*.

35 — Hallett 1978: 198n5.

36 — Is Tiberius Priapus' *eromenos*? This sort of dismembered religious experience with a material attribute of a god echoes Roman ritual and religious cult. See Feeney 1998: 95-7.

37 — Hallett 1978: 198.

38 — The passage, too, seems to be in conversation with ideas of metamorphosis, if Ovid *Met.* 4.49-50 (*Nais an ut cantu nimiumque potentibus herbis/verterit in tacitos iuvenalia corpora pisces*; "or how a Naiad with a spell and exceedingly powerful drugs turned the bodies of youths into silent fish").

monstrous admixture of images comes into focus. There is no masculine or feminine. Penetrator and penetrated are inconsequential. Bodies merge with bodies into a twisted mass. Human bodies give way to animal bodies. Children are pervasive. They not only become *spintriae* and *pisciculi*, Suetonius tells us that they were dressed as *Panisci* and *Nymphae*, which inspired the nickname of Capri as *Caprineum*:

In silvis quoque ac nemoribus passim Venerios locos commentus est prostantisque per antra et cavas rupes ex utriusque sexus pube Paniscorum et Nympharum habitu, quae palam iam et vulgo nomine insulae abutentes “Caprineum” dicitabant.

And in forests and groves at random he created Sex-Scapes and individuals who were prostituting themselves throughout caves and hollowed-out crags, from the youth of each sex, dressed like little Pans and Nymphs. These things openly and in public people were teasing with a pun on the island’s name by calling it “Goat Park”.

The *Caprineum* mirrors the visual episodes of Pan and Nymphs depicted in the idyllic and pastoral landscape paintings, as well as elite garden spaces. The paintings effectively come to life in a sort of bizarre recreation and performance of visual art. The latent sexual violence of the paintings and in the gardens is emphatically manifest in the *Caprineum*. The *Venerii loci* are places of violent inversion in relation to the material culture that shadows them. Visitors to the *Caprineum* would move through the spaces to encounter children dressed as Panlings and Nymphs. Effectively, the children are stripped of the ideal component that made them sexually charged in Roman terms – their softness³⁹. The boys would have covered their legs with a shaggy hide, wholly inverting the very thing that epitomized their sexual desirability. Likewise, elite garden spaces often situated Romans amidst a moment of divine wrath or danger. For example, in the *horti Sallustiani* and *horti Lamiani*, statues were erected depicting the very moment Diana and Apollo began slaughtering the Niobids⁴⁰. The representational implication upon the viewers of the sculptures is that they have been caught amidst the storm of arrows that are killing the children. The audience too is in danger of dying alongside the Niobids. The *Caprineum* functions similarly; visitors move through a landscape dotted with Pans and Nymphs. Divine encounters in wild, uncivilized landscapes are notoriously dangerous and destructive for mortals. Yet, in this instance, mortals rape the gods. The sacral, idyllic landscape, as well, simply becomes a natural brothel. Children, again, become the victims.

39 — See Richlin 1992: 35-7, 79 and Bartman 2002.

40 — See Newby 2012.

I would like to end this paper with section 62, a passage that realigns much of the material in sections 43-44 along a different vector that defines the sexual activity on Capri as a form of torture. At section 63 Suetonius describes the creative aptitude Tiberius displayed in forming new types of torture. He begins this section with the verb *excogitare*, the only other time it is used in the *vita*:

Excogitauerat autem inter genera cruciatus etiam, ut larga meri potione per fallaciam oneratos, repente ueretris deligatis, fidicularum simul urinaeque tormento distenderet.

Moreover he thought of innovations between kinds of torture even, so that after his victims had been laden deceitfully with large draughts of wine – suddenly their genitals were bound up, and he stretched the men out with the torment of the rack, and at the same time, with the torment of urine (which I take here as the need to urinate).

It is not enough for Tiberius to torture his victims with the stretching of the *fidicula* (an instrument of torture that utilized ropes and bands, resembling a lyre); his inventiveness comprises the filling of his victims' bladders with wine and then binding their *veretra* (a rare word which could refer to the penis, testes or vagina), so that the urine cannot exit the urethra⁴¹. As his victims feel the pull and stretch of their bodies upon the *fidicula*, they also suffer the agony of their hyper-infibulation, as urine, released from the bladder, is blocked and constrained still within the shaft of the penis. Tiberius constructs a cruel doublet between the entangled body of his victim upon the rack and the victim's tangled up genitals upon his body, each mimicking the other, while catalyzing two very different forms of pain and discomfort, as the externalized stretching of the body coincides with the internal expansion and tension of the excretory tract. We ought to imagine that Tiberius observed the torture itself in case he might discover more effective innovations.

What might have informed Tiberius' terrifying inventiveness? It is possible that Tiberius was inspired by the *κυνοδέσμη* ("dog collar"), which tied and bound the foreskin of naked boys and men in order to keep the glands from public view. The foreskin knot can be seen on countless Greek vase paintings. Paul Zanker suggests that:

[T]o expose a long penis, and especially the head, was regarded as shameless and dishonorable, something we see only in depictions of slaves and barbarians. Since in some men the distended foreskin may no longer close properly, allowing the long penis to hang out in unsightly fashion, a string could be used to avoid such an unattractive spectacle, at least to

41 — Adams 1982: 52-3.

judge from evidence of vase painting...We may then consider it a sign of the modesty and decency expected in particular of the older participants in the symposium⁴².

It also resulted in the lengthening of the foreskin, which, as we know from various writers, was a sign of attraction among the Greeks⁴³. I think we are to imagine Tiberius using something like the *kynodesme* for an altogether different and more nefarious purpose⁴⁴. Rather than allowing the men the physical pleasures of wine and (most likely) convivial sex, Tiberius transforms their bodies into nodes of pain and suffering, utilizing the very instruments of pleasure – wine and sexual organs – as weapons. And rather than the *kynodesme* being employed in its proper convivial context, it comes to contain within the men their convivial wine. Normative convivial activity becomes torture. Sex on Capri, too, becomes a kind of torture. A similar structural innovation on Tiberius' part informs the framework of sexual activity. Sections 43-44 are a narrative of monstrosity, chaos, horror and torture filtered through patterns of standard Roman sex practice. Even the reader of the episode becomes implicated in its voyeuristic *nefas*.

Many of the features of Suetonius' narrative move through normative elements of Roman sex culture: brothels and prostitutes, sex manuals, erotic paintings in domestic spaces, pederasty and elite garden spaces. But each element is reconstituted as something dehumanizing and dangerous in Suetonius' telling. Sections 43-44 are halting and haunting, as they highlight that any discussion of Roman sexuality is a function of embodiment. The role of the emperor in the expression of the various modes of sexual embodiment could be so disruptive that the state of the body itself became permeable and assimilative to the imperial phallus. In fundamental ways, all bodies become abject. Only Tiberius' body remains intact, although it too undergoes distortion and transformation. Sections 43-44 operate on the extremes and liminalities of Roman sex. While the Pan-goat sculpture ultimately invests the divine-animal sexual display with something wholly human, Tiberius constructs a radical sexuality, in which the closer one orbits the emperor, the more Roman notions of sex become deconstructed, atomized and reassembled in ways that expose a destructive and dangerous pathology of Tiberian sexuality. There is nothing human left on Tiberius' Capri.

42 — Zanker 1995: 28-9.

43 — See Hodges 2001.

44 — The philhellenism of Tiberius is seen even here; Roman infibulation usually employed a metal pin. Priapus is the only god connected to infibulation in Roman literature (*Priapea* 77.17: *neve imponite fibulam Priapo*). On this line and Roman infibulation see Hooper 1999:135.

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