6. While Gibbon talks of ‘odio’ as a reading that defies reconciliation by torture, Madvig reviles it with the words ‘quid absurdius’?

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**PERSIUS’ BOILED BUTTOCKS**

At *Satire* 4. 39-41, in the course of an inventory (not for the queasy) of the physical decrepitude afflicting what Emily Gowers has nicely called ‘the rent boy transformed from blooming youth into sad old age’, Persius exclaims:

\[ \text{quinque palaestritae licet haec plantaria vellant} \]
\[ \text{elixasque nates labefactent forcipe adunca,} \]
\[ \text{non tamen ista felix ullo mansuescit aratro.} \]

Niall Rudd in his Penguin translation turns these lines into the following English:

> Though half a dozen masseurs in the gym uproot this plantation, assailing your flabby buttocks with hot pitch and the claws of tweezers, no plough ever made will tame that bracken.

In cause here are the boiled buttocks. Earlier commentators such as Conington and Gildersleeve passed them over in discreet silence, the latter adding censorial spice by quoting Pierre Bayle: ‘Les Satires de Perse sont dévérgondées.’ The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* is equally quiet. Authorities ranging from Lewis & Short to Rudd and such modern editors as Cowherd, Harvey, and Jenkinson translate ‘elixas’ as ‘flabby’, with the added notion of softening up the buttocks to facilitate depilation. Gowers herself does not explore the detail. Nor from their very different standpoints do Morford, for whom the lines are ‘obscene and unattractive’, or Wehrle who finds in them a ‘delightful obscenity’. There seems to be nothing about the matter in the latest bibliographical surveys.

There may be (dare we say?) an extra wrinkle. ‘Elixas nates’ is a powerful, albeit characteristic of Persius, expression, seemingly without parallel apart from the obvious imitation in Ausonius, *Epigr.* 100. 3 (Green), ‘elicto plantaria podice vellis’. The phrase might be punningly parodied in Juvenal’s gothically comic lines (13. 84-5), ‘si vero et pater est, “comedam”
inquit "fieble nati" sinciput elixi Pharioque madentis aceto", though he may here be spoofing his own verses from 3. 292–94: 'fortior? "unde venis?" exclamat "cuius aceto/cuius conche tumes? quis tecum sectile porrum/sutor et elixi vervecis labra comedit"?', The verb is regular in Apician recipes for boiling meat and other comestibles.

'Flabby' hardly seems strong enough. And although a preliminary soaking in hot water may perhaps aid depilation, this does not seem to be Persius' point. In the preceding lines, the individual in question has had his anal and pubic hairs plucked out and shaved without benefit of lubrication. The usual methods involved plucking, shaving, singeing, and the application of pitch or resin. In a characteristic burst of moral indignation, the elder Pliny (NH 14. 123) laments the popularity of resin as a depilatory for men: 'pudetque confiteri maximum iam honorem eius esse in evelleridis virorum corpori pilis'. Despite Rudd's translation, there is no mention of hot pitch in the Latin of Persius' line 40. Moreover, the general tone is at least as much one of therapy as of prettification. Persius goes on to talk about the man's wound in the groin ('ilia subter/caecum vulnus habes', 43–4) and his enfeebled nerves. It is likewise with the earlier detail (33; cf. 18) of lying in the sun after a good oiling. This is therapy, one frequently prescribed by the Julio-Claudian doctor Celsus, not twentieth-century style heliolatry; in Richlin's (188) droll words, 'accusations of sunbathing do not form part of the Roman stereotype of the pathic homosexual'. There is also a curative element in the onion eaten in Persius 4. 30–1: onions were (and are) widely regarded as both helpful in the reduction of tumours and for stimulating the nervous system.

As Rudd puts it in a general estimate of Persius: 'Physical and spiritual interact ... medical language came naturally to the Stoics, who laid much stress on the therapy of the emotions.' Boiling the buttocks ought to have something to do with medical palliatives. Now, if we turn to that most agreeable set of seventeenth-century sketches, John Aubrey's Brief Lives, the account of Sir Jonas Moore includes the following medical tip: 'Sciatica: he cured it by boyling his buttock (sic).’ Aubrey knew what he was talking about: he collected remedies and included a short disquisition on sciatica in his Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme. Moreover, another contemporary account, Robert Hooke's diary for 19 November, 1672, describes watching Sir Jonas mitigate his sciatica with a combined application of hot steam, heated firepans, and oil manually rubbed in. At the time, such remedies were commonly associated with the treatment of venereal diseases. As far as we know, these were not widespread in ancient Rome, but the correlation is still striking in the light of Persius' own combination of the images of effeminacy, pathic practices, and decrepitude.

On this reckoning, then, Persius knew that immersion in hot water was not merely an effeminate luxury as moralists like Seneca maintained.
There may also be a gibe at the contemporary revival of Antonius Musa's famous cold water treatments, scornfully described by Pliny. Also, some imitation and parody of Horace, *Epist.* 1. 15, wherein there is a light-hearted account of both the fad for Musa's cold plunges in his time and the efficacy of hot vapour treatment for aches and pains. Persius' 'unctus cesses . . . nervos' look as if they echo Horace's 'cessantem nervis . . . unctius'. Horace's poem ends, 'vos sapere et solos aio bene vivere, quorum/conspicuitur nitidis fundata pecunia villis'. Persius' finale is in virtual reverse: 'respue, quod non es; tollat sua munera Cerdo;/tecum habita; noris, quam sit tibi curta supellex', an ending whose phraseology and thought also owe something both to Horace, *Odes* 3. 24 (not 14, as in Conington). 64, 'curtæ nescio quid semper abest rei', and to *Sat.* 2. 7. 112, 'non horam tecum esse potes'. Also worth noting is the correlation between Horace, *Epist.* 1. 15. 36–7, 'scilicet ut ventres lamna candente nepotum/diceret urendos' and Persius 6. 34, 'iratus quod rem curtaveris', quickly followed up (37–40) by Bestius laying down the moral law.

As one who studied under a Greek doctor and died young of a stomach disease, Persius was well placed to know about illness and medicine. With all the above items collated and considered, I venture to suggest that we may have come to the bottom of the poet's boiled buttocks.

NOTES

1. 'Persius and the decoction of Nero', in (ed. J. Elsner & J. Masters) *Reflections of Nero*, London 1994, 131–50. While I don't share her fanciful theory of decoction as the *leitmotif* of Neronian literature, Gowers' essay is deliciously written and laced with telling quotations from the writers of the period.


11. There are antecedents of a sort in Varro, fr. 531, 'in humu calceos facis elixos', and in a bather's complaint ('To hell with the bath! It has turned me into boiled meat') in a fragment of Antiphanes quoted at Athenaeus 18c.

12. See (e.g.) Martial 3. 74, 12. 32; Suetonius, *Aug.* 68, *Otho.* 12. 1. Jerome was still rehashing this material in his day; cf. D. Wiesen, *St. Jerome as a Satirist*, Ithaca

13. See especially 4. 29. 3, where rub-downs in the sun are prescribed for both general and specific bodily aches and pains.


16. In this discussion of Aubrey and related matters, I am much indebted to letters on the subject to the Times Literary Supplement (27 May, 1994), 15, by K. Bennett and F. Willmoth.

17. Though there is now some modern speculation about the possibility of syphilis in the ancient world, and it is worth remembering that the lichen disease (‘mentagra’), a malady caused by kissing, that broke out in the reign of Tiberius, could only be alleviated by heat treatments and cured by cauterisation to the bone; cf. Pliny, NH 26. 1–3.

18. Epist. 108. 16.

19. NH 29. 10.

20. According to the Suetonian sketch of his life in the De Poetis.

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THREE AEDILESIDPS: PHILIPPUS, COTTA, CURIO

In his ‘Index of Careers’, Broughton placed the notation ‘Aed.?’ against the names of L. Marcius Philippus (cos. 91), C. Aurelius Cotta (cos. 75), and C. Scribonius Curio (cos. 76). The three men also earned a queried place among the aediles in the section of his work entitled ‘Magistrates of Uncertain Date’ (Appendix II), with a note to the following effect: ‘Attained all the highest offices (Cic. Off. 2.59). No specific proof that he held the aedileship.’ In his last Supplement Broughton conceded that the three men were ‘probably’ never aediles, but he refrained from stating this as a fact, since in the same passage ‘Cicero’s reference . . . to the relatively modest expense of his own aedileship might cause some uncertainty.’ It can be shown that these men deserve to be included in the aedilician fasti.

Just one ancient passage is in dispute (Cic. Off. 2.59): ‘L. quidem Philippus Q. f. . . . gloriari solebat se sine ullo munere adepturn esse omnia, quae haberentur amplissima. dicebat idem Cotta, Curio.’ And just one serious objection has been made against the aedileships of the three men. Shatzman reasoned: ‘Philippus says explicitly that he did not celebrate any games, and not that his games were not expensive. The aediles might
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