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AN OBSCENE WORD PLAY IN POMPEII

Abstract: Buecheler's punctuation of CLE 932, along with his explanation of the distich, does not seem quite satisfying for reasons of syntax. On the other hand, the literal interpretation of this distich leaves aside an obvious absurdity. I have therefore proposed an explanation founded on obscene use of the words *matella* and *meiere* in Roman slang.

On a wall in Pompeii, an ancient guest of a nearby *deversorium* has left the following message¹:

*Miximus in lecto: fateor, peccauimus, hospes.
 Si dices "quare", nulla matella fuit.*

It seems to be a mocking response to some piece of Pompeian inn-keepers' poetry, the purpose of which was to proclaim actual rules of behaviour in the house, or simply remind the guests of good manners². I shall here discuss two points concerning the correct reading of the distich and its real meaning respectively.

Buecheler (CLE 932) punctuates the distich as follows:

*Miximus in lecto, fateor, peccauimus, hospes,
 si dices quare nulla matella fuit.*

arguing that the second sentence means 'I'll admit it wasn't fair of me, [but only] if you explain why there was no chamber pot [in my room]', and seemingly rejecting the other reading ('minus apte *dices dictum est si hanc accipis sententiam: peccauimus, sed si quaeres quare, defuit matella*'). Still, the evaluation of *si dices: 'quare?'* as 'minus apte dictum' does not prove there is a real need for a different reading. In fact, Buecheler's remark is less of a reading proposal than an aesthetic judgement, as the many instances are where he points at happier wordings overlooked by the authors of epigraphic poems. In cultivated poetry we should of course expect a more elegant turn,

¹ Text from H. Geist, *Pompeianische Wandinschriften*, München 1936, no. G20(=CIL IV 4957).

² Cf. ib. G21 *Abluat unda pedes puer et detergeat udos, mappa torum uelet, lintea nostra caue.*

such as *quaesieris quare* (cf. Prop. III 22,14); but in colloquial style it is by no means unusual for a direct question to be introduced by *dicere* instead of *quaerere* or *rogare*: so e.g. Cic. Att. IV 2, 5 *dices: 'quid igitur causae fuit?'*. Moreover, Buecheler's reading *fateor.. si dices* implies an atypical combination of the future and the *praesens pro futuro* tenses in the hypothetic period, common patterns being *siFut2+Praes* (cf. Pl. Rud. 168 *saluae sunt si illos fluctus deuitauerint*; Poen. 671 *rex sum si ego illum.. ad me allexero*), and *siPraes+Fut1* (cf. Pl. Aul. 644 *id quoque iam fiet nisi fatere*; Asin. 193 *si mihi dantur duo talenta .. hanc tibi noctem dabo*)³.

Independently of the above, we may search for the real meaning of this distich. In fact, the very idea *miximus in lecto, [nam] nulla matella fuit*, if interpreted literally, seems to be quite absurd. A different interpretation is therefore necessary. It is known that in Petr. 45, 8 *magis illa matella digna fuit quam taurus iactaret* the word *matella* means 'prostitute'. (Buecheler⁴ also recognized an allusion to this meaning in Mart. XII 32, 13 *matella curto rupta latere meiebat*; and although *matella* here retains its primary meaning of a 'chamber pot', obscene allusions are beyond doubt if we consider the co-occurrence of *rupta latere*, harmless at first sight, but clearly reminiscent of the slang expression *rumpere latus*, cf. Mart. XI 104, 6.) The other key word, the verb *meiere*, also had an obscene acception in Roman slang, namely 'ejaculate' (cf. Catul. 67, 30–31 *egregium naras mira pietate parentem qui ipse sui gnati minxerit in gremium*; Hor. S. II 7, 51–52 *ne ditior aut formae melioris meiat eodem*). Obscene acceptations of both *matella* and *meiere* seem to reflect a more general tendency of conveying sex-related meanings to other words in the field as well, cf. *cacare* 'pedicari' (Priap. 69, 4; CIL X 8145), *uesica* 'cunnus' (Juv. I 139; VI 64). So the Pompeian distich appears to be as far from absurdity as from decency: it is an objection to the inn-keeper who did not care to provide sexual entertainment for his clients.

³ For these and other examples see Kühner-Stegmann II, pp. 119, 146.

⁴ F. Buecheler, *Kleine Schriften I*, Leipzig 1915, p. 118.