

# LESBIANTIQUITY

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JUVENAL  
IUVENALIS

MILK-SISTERS &  
CUNNILINGUISTES

WOMEN BEHAVING  
BADLY

LESBIANTIQUITY © Georgina Barker (Portknockie: Sapphizdat, 2024)

Juvenal translation, introduction, and notes © Georgina Barker 2024

Latin text from: Susanna Morton Braund, ed., *Juvenal and Persius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015)

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## THE TRANSLATOR

### Dr Georgina Barker

I am the inventor of the Root & Branch translation method, which I developed to highlight the queerness of selected classical texts, drawing on my experience as a translator from Russian. I am the author of *SPQR in the USSR: Elena Shvarts's Classical Antiquity*, and the compiler and director of the verbatim play *Princess Dashkova, the Woman Who Shook the World*. I am currently researching receptions of Greek and Roman 'lesbianism' by Russian lesbians and bisexual women. I live in Scotland with my wife and my parrot.



## DECIMUS IUNIUS IUVENALIS

Juvenal (Iuvenalis in Latin) wrote his sixteen acerbic Satires in the second century AD (c. 110–130).<sup>1</sup> Their hexameter verses denounce the corrupt morals of contemporary Rome. This was during the relative peace and freedom of the reigns of Emperors Trajan and Hadrian, but not forgetting the dangers of life under Emperor Domitian. Little is known of Juvenal's biography, but he was probably a trained orator and of high social standing, and he was certainly a friend of the older poet Martial, who addressed three epigrams to him.<sup>2</sup>

Juvenal first alludes to female homosexuality in his Second Satire, which is devoted to attacking effeminate men. He takes on the persona of the 'adulteress' Laronia, who protests male hypocrisy, saying that – unlike men – women do not fuck each other. The reader is left not entirely believing her...

In his Sixth Satire Juvenal parades a vast array of monstrous women as examples for why Postumus, his addressee, should not get married. Juvenal's persona in this Satire is the Misogynist; his opinions and depictions of extreme female misbehaviour are clearly intended to be taken with both amusement and a hefty pinch of salt. Juvenal presents one manifestation of female monstrosity – women having sex with women – in a trio of scenes.

The first female monstrosity is the 'drunken Venus/sex', a woman who participates in oral sex (6.300–5). Her partner's gender is not indicated, but the scene is full of allusions to female genitalia, and commentators in the Renaissance, reading these three episodes in conjunction, saw this as lesbian cunnilingus.<sup>3</sup>

Second come Maura and Tullia, who are clearly depicted having sex with each other (6.306–13) – although many attempts have been made by translators over the years to disguise this fact.

<sup>1</sup> Braund (2015) pp. 19–20.

<sup>2</sup> 7.24, 7.91, 12.18. Braund (2015) pp. 18–19.

<sup>3</sup> Schachter 'Lesbian Philology' (2015) pp. 46–48.

Last are the sexual excesses of the female-only rites of Bona Dea (the Good Goddess), at which women excite themselves – and each other? – into a frenzy of thigh-wetting lust, competing over who can wiggle their bottoms best, and then clamour for men, or boys, or even male animals to come and fuck them (6.314–34). But two of the women – Saufeia and Medullina – display behaviour (6.320–3) which, on closer inspection, could be just as lesbian as Maura and Tullia’s. This scene has been called a ‘precursor to the pornographic leitmotif in which lesbian sex serves as the titillating foreplay before the main event with a man who can actually finish the job’.<sup>4</sup>

So infamous were these scenes that Anne Lister could use Juvenal as one of her secret codes for ascertaining if a woman was aware of and open to lesbianism: in 1823 she wrote in her diary, ‘Miss Pickford has read the Sixth Satyr of Juvenal. She understands these matters well enough.’<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Schachter ‘Lesbian Acts’ (2015) p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> July 1823. Lister (2010) p. 291.

## ROOT & BRANCH READING GUIDE

Our translations branch out to explore  
a variety of options for the text:  
any variants in the original < <sup>Greek</sup> Latin > texts  
and the various possible meanings in English.

Our translations are rooted in the words  
of the original text, replicating when possible  
word order, root meanings of words, and  
grammatical gender  $\left( \begin{array}{c} [n] \\ [f] \\ [m] \end{array} \right)$  of words about people.

You, the reader, will choose which branches you prefer to follow.

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## SATIRE 2.47-54

[...] there'll not be any

example so  $\langle \begin{smallmatrix} \text{accursable} \\ \text{detestable} \end{smallmatrix} \rangle$  in our  $\langle \begin{smallmatrix} \text{sex} \\ \text{gender} \end{smallmatrix} \rangle$ .

$\left( \begin{smallmatrix} \text{Tedia} \\ \text{Media} \\ \text{Mevia} \end{smallmatrix} \right)$  does not lick Cluvia, nor Flora – Catulla:

50 Hispo  $\langle \begin{smallmatrix} \text{goes under} \\ \text{submits to} \end{smallmatrix} \rangle$  young men and pales from both sicknesses.

now, do we  $\langle \begin{smallmatrix} \text{present cases} \\ \text{try lawsuits} \end{smallmatrix} \rangle$ ? have we got to know

civil law? or with any noise  $\langle \begin{smallmatrix} \text{disturb} \\ \text{move} \end{smallmatrix} \rangle$  your [pl]  $\langle \begin{smallmatrix} \text{courts} \\ \text{fora} \end{smallmatrix} \rangle$ ?

wrestle –  $\langle \begin{smallmatrix} \text{few [f]} \\ \text{few women} \end{smallmatrix} \rangle$ , consume  $\left( \begin{smallmatrix} \text{collops} \\ \text{hams} \\ \text{colyphia} \end{smallmatrix} \right)$  –  $\langle \begin{smallmatrix} \text{few [f]} \\ \text{few women} \end{smallmatrix} \rangle$

you [pl]  $\langle \begin{smallmatrix} \text{draw out} \\ \text{tease} \end{smallmatrix} \rangle$  wool [...]



[...] non erit ullum

exemplum in nostro tam detestabile sexu.

$\left( \begin{smallmatrix} \text{Tedia} \\ \text{Media} \\ \text{Mevia} \end{smallmatrix} \right)$  non lambit Cluuiam nec Flora Catullam:

50 Hispo subit iuvenes et morbo pallet utroque.

numquid nos agimus causas? civilia iura

novimus? aut ullo strepitu fora vestra movemus?

luctantur paucae, comedunt colyphia paucae.

vos lanam trahitis [...]

## NOTES

2.49 *Media/Tedia/Mevia*: the manuscripts vary on the spelling of the first woman's name (see Boehringer 2021 p. 311 n. 401). I prefer 'Media', as it fits best with Juvenal's allusions to Martial 7.67 (see LESBIANTIQUITY 17), specifically line 15, *medias puellas*, 'girls' middles' (i.e. cunts).

2.49 *lick*: unlike Martial (7.67.17), Juvenal/Laronia uses the politer, less sexual verb for 'licking' – *lambo* instead of *lingo*.

2.49 *Media/Tedia/Mevia, Cluvia, Flora, Catulla*: the four women in Juvenal/Laronia's list have usually been seen as prostitutes/courtesans (e.g. Braund 2018 p. 133). But Boehringer (2021 p. 312) makes the point that women's names are only known as 'prostitute/courtesan names' because prostitutes/courtesans were a high proportion of the women who were written about in antiquity; and that since the topic Laronia is responding to is the *lex Iulia*, Augustus's moral law against adultery, resurrected by Domitian, she must be listing names of married women.

2.50 *Hispo goes under / submits to young men and pales from both sicknesses*: i.e. Hispo takes both the passive and the active role in intercourse with younger men. Hispo's greater age is emphasised by his name, which alludes to the adjective *hispidus*, 'bristly'; pallor was associated with overindulgence in sex (Braund 2018 p. 134). Romans considered it especially demeaning for an older man to be penetrated by a younger man.

2.51 *do we present cases / try lawsuits?*: yes, if Satire 6.242–5 is believed.

2.52 *your [pl] courts/fora*: i.e. men's.

2.53 *wrestle – few [f], consume hams/collops/colyphia – few [f]*: Juvenal/Laronia here references Martial's presumably infamous tribad Philaenis of 7.67, who both wrestled and consumed *coloephia* (here spelled *colyphia*), a kind of meat for athletes – probably a pig's hip joint (Adams 1982 pp. 49–50). The reference to the tribad Philaenis rather undermines Laronia's contention that women never lick each other: she has to acknowledge the famous example, and her emphatic 'nots' change to 'fews'.

2.54 *you [pl] draw out / tease wool*: here and over the next few lines Juvenal/Laronia extends the tribad's gender deviance to homosexual men, depicting them (ludicrously) doing all kinds of women's textile work.

**SATIRE 6.300-313, 320-323**

300 [...] for what does drunken < Venus  
sex > care?  
between groin and head - < that there may be differences  
what the differences may be > she  
< doesn't know  
can't tell >,  
she in the middle, already, of nights < bites  
munches > large < oysters  
giant > mussels >,  
when unguents are foaming, perfused with neat Falernian,  
when drinking is from a shell, when already with < whirling  
dizziness >  
< roof  
ceiling >  
305 is walking around and table is rising up with < double  
twin > lamps.



300 [...] quid enim Venus ebria curat?  
inguinis et capitis quae sint discrimina nescit,  
grandia quae mediis iam noctibus ostrea mordet,  
cum perfusa mero spumant unguenta Falerno,  
cum bibitur concha, cum iam vertigine tectum  
305 ambulat et geminis exsurgit mensa lucernis.



## NOTES

6.300 *drunken Venus/sex*: Juvenal capitalises on the fact that the common Roman euphemism for 'sex' is the name of the goddess of love to create a vivid picture of a drunk and libidinous woman while ostensibly talking about drunk sexual intercourse in general.

6.301 The reference is to oral sex, but Juvenal does not specify whose groin and head the woman mixes up – her own or someone else's – nor their gender. However, it would seem easier to confuse a mouth with a vulva than with a penis.

6.302 *bites/munches large/giant oysters/mussels*: the oversized bivalves could be mentioned here just to give an impression of luxury (oysters, for Romans, were 'a great delicacy': Nadeau 2011 p. 175) – or they may be a covert allusion to female genitalia. Adams (1982) does not list oysters/mussels among the Latin slang for cunts; but see my note 6.304 below.

6.303 *unguents are foaming, perfused with neat Falernian*: mixing perfume into wine was connected with Greek/Eastern luxury; here the revellers go even further and mix wine into perfume (Nadeau 2011 p. 175).

6.304 *drinking is from a shell*: the impersonal verb *bibitur* gives no clue as to who is drinking. A *concha* was a bivalve shellfish, e.g. a mussel or oyster, but by metonymy could refer to objects shaped like shellfish. Here, this is probably (ostensibly) a shell-shaped perfume-holder, continuing the previous line's theme of mixing wine and perfume (Courtney 2013 pp. 256–7). But *concha* was also used metonymically to mean 'cunt' (Plautus *Rudens* / *The Rope* 704: Lewis & Short 1879). This suggests that, just as this entire passage is ostensibly about drunk sex but is subtextually about a drunk woman having sex, all the references ostensibly to bivalves are subtextually about cunts. The profusion of implied cunts gives a distinct lesbian vibe to this scene.

6.304–5 The spinning surroundings and double vision return the scene's emphasis from sex to drunkenness.

306 go on, now, puzzle why she <sup>sucks in</sup>  
<sniffs> the air with a <sup>grin</sup>  
<sneer> ,

308 Maura, when by <sup>Chastity's</sup>  
<Pudicitia's> ancient altar she's passing,

307 what Tullia her milk-sister says to well-known Maura,

307 Tullia, what well-known Maura's milk-sister says to her,

308 when <sup>she</sup>  
<Maura> by <sup>Chastity's</sup>  
<Pudicitia's> ancient altar is passing,



306 i nunc et dubita qua sorbeat aera sanna

308 Maura Pudicitiae veterem cum praeterit aram,

307 Tullia quid dicat notae collectea Maurae,

307 Tullia, quid dicat notae collectea Maurae,

308 <sup>illa</sup>  
<Maura> Pudicitiae veterem cum praeterit aram,

6.306 *puzzle why she sucks in / sniffs the air with a grin/sneer*: Nadeau (2011 p. 181) explains this as the woman having been 'struck by an idea which makes her grin and suck in her breath in excitement' – an idea which she and her partner carry out a few lines later. Watson & Watson (2014 p. 168) explain this as 'a gesture of derision and rejection' of the temple 'made by wrinkling the nose' and giving 'a contemptuous sniff'. In my preferred interpretation and ordering of lines 307–8, her gasp and grin or sniff and sneer could have been caused by what her partner said to her.

6.307–8 Manuscripts and commentators are confused about the order of the lines, and so whether it is Tullia or Maura who sneers/grins and speaks; and about who is Maura's milk-sister: Tullia, another Maura (two of them?!), or an unnamed third woman (Watson & Watson 2014 pp. 283–4). I prefer the order 308–7, which I find flows best, requires least contortion to understand, and gives both women an opening shot at misbehaviour – Maura grinning/sneering after Tullia makes a shocking comment.

6.308, 307 *Maura*: a nickname meaning 'Moor'; Maura is probably black. This has led many scholars to assume Maura is a slave; however, the transgressiveness of her behaviour is only shocking if she is a citizen, and Juvenal's targets are (therefore) predominantly high-born; high status is also suggested by her use of a litter (Watson & Watson 2014 pp. 284–5, 169).

6.308 *Chastity's/Pudicitia's ancient altar*: there were two historic temples of Chastity in Rome (plus one newly erected one) – Pudicitia Patricia (for patrician women) in the Forum Boarium, and Pudicitia Plebeia (for plebeian women) in the Vicus Longus. The temples' rites were 'open only to *univirae* and *matronae* of proven chastity'; when passing the altar one was supposed to 'raise a hand to the lips and kiss it in a sign of respect' (Watson & Watson 2014 pp. 168–9). Chastity/Pudicitia opened Satire 6 (her name is the second word), depicted in humanity's golden age, before she left the Earth in disgust. She reappears only here, to emphasise that lesbian sex is 'the ultimate transgression' (Boehringer 2021 p. 315).

6.307 *milk-sister*: *collactea*, literally 'co-milk-suckler' or 'foster-sister', is an innuendo, implying not that both women sucked from the same nurse's breast as babies – the usual meaning – but that they suck each other's breasts now. Another interpretation of this innuendo is that Maura is a famous fellatrix – or 'milk-sucker' – and that her 'milk-sister' shares this predilection; Juvenal mentions a fellatrix called Maura in Satire 10.223–4 (Watson & Watson 2014 pp. 286, 284). I would argue that if oral sex is the joke here, the 'milk' in question need not necessarily be semen.

6.307 *well-known*: innuendo – not only 'notorious', but also 'familiar' to Tullia.

6.308 *illa; she*: i.e. Tullia. Delz's emendation, adopted by Nadeau (p. 181).

at nights here they <put  
park> their litters, they try (squirting  
getting wet) here  
pissing

310 and they fill the goddess's statue with long siphons

and take turns riding and with (moon as  
no  
no man as) (witness  
testicle) they do  
the moves.

then off to their homes they go: you, when daylight's returned, tread

in your wife's <cum  
urine> going to see [m] your <big  
important>  
friends.

[...]



noctibus hic ponunt lecticas, micturiunt hic  
310 effigiemque deae longis siphonibus implent  
inque vices equitant ac <nullo  
luna> teste moventur.  
inde domos abeunt: tu calcas luce reversa  
coniugis urinam magnos visurus amicos.

[...]

6.309, 313 *they try getting wet/squirting/pissing ... cum/urine*: the urinary words *micturiunt* (usually, 'piss') and *urinam* (usually, 'urine') really refer to sex; they were commonly used by Romans about male ejaculation, and could be applied to 'female secretions' too (Adams 1982 p. 92). While it is most likely that Juvenal was describing Maura and Tullia becoming wet from arousal and/or orgasm, they may also have been ejaculating, or (least likely) urinating as a kind of sexual kink. The orgasm and ejaculation interpretations are supported by the desiderative form of *micturiunt*, which I think puts *mingere* as the aim of the couple, i.e. the culmination of their efforts in the next two lines.

6.310 *siphons*: *siphonibus* has usually been interpreted as 'streams', i.e. referring to their lubrication/ejaculate/urine of the previous line, but I prefer Nadeau's (2011 p. 183) explanation that since 'a siphon is a tube through which liquid passes', and is used in Greek to mean a phallus, here it denotes the women's strap-on dildos, which they use to fuck the statue. A variant in a fourteenth-century manuscript charmingly read *symphonibus*, 'symphonies' / 'harmonious sounds' (Schachter 'Lesbian Acts' 2015 p. 29).

6.311 *riding*: horse riding was a common Roman metaphor for sex where the penetrated partner is on top (Adams 1982 pp. 165–6). The women are either riding each other or, as Nadeau (2011 p. 183) thinks, the statue.

6.311 *nullo/luna teste; with no / no man as // moon/Luna as witness/testicle*: an innuendo, based on the double meaning of *testis*, to the effect that the lesbian sex is both unwitnessed/untestified and untesticled. I give Hendry's emendation *nullo* as my preferred variant, as its simplicity makes the joke clearer and funnier. However, there are persuasive arguments in favour of retaining *luna*: Juvenal may be referencing Horace's *Satires* 1.8.35–6 where the moon/Luna blushes and hides from witnessing the deeds of the witches Canidia and Sagana (Nadeau 2011 p. 185); the moon's roundness enhances the pun on 'testicle'; and Juvenal uses a similar phrase in *Satire* 8.149 (Courtney 2013 p. 258).

6.311 *do the moves*: my attempt at translating *moventur*, middle-passive of *moveo*, 'move', used by Romans about 'sexual motions' (Adams p. 195).

320 with <garland  
crown> put down Saufeia calls out the pimps'  
 slave girls and carries off the hip-<dangling  
swinging> prize,  
 she <adores  
implores> Medullina's ( rub  
flow ) in ( humping  
rocking  
jiggling ):  
 the palm's between the mistresses, ( virtue  
excellence ) equal to birth.  
 manliness



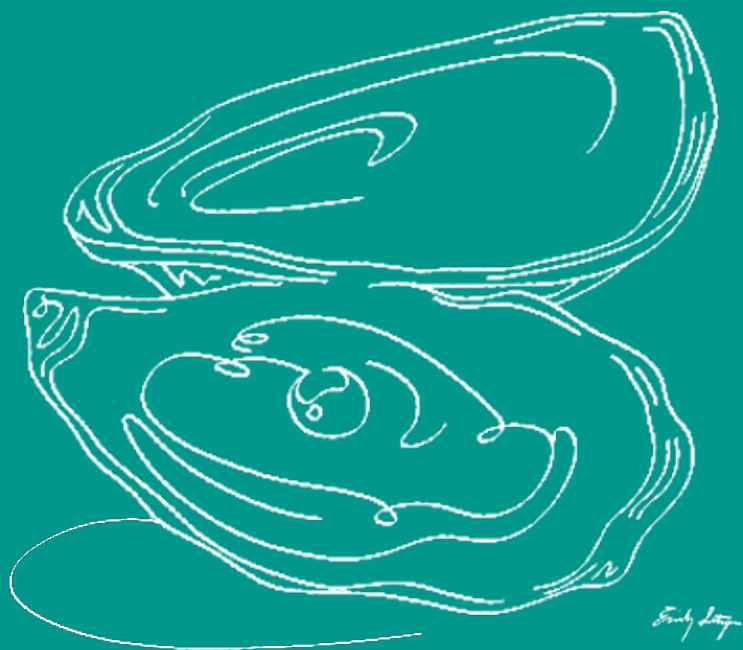
320 lenonum ancillas posita Saufeia corona  
 provocat et tollit pendentis praemia coxae,  
 ipsa Medullinae ( frictum  
fluctum ) crisantis adorat:  
 palma inter dominas, virtus natalibus aequa.

6.320, 323 *garland/crown ... the palm: the prize (6.321) for the women's aristocrat-vs-slaves hip-dangling/swinging contest (Nadeau 2011 pp. 189–90).*

6.322 *fluctum/frictum/fructum; flow/rub/enjoyment: the three variants found in the manuscripts, in order of frequency (Braund 2015 p. 262).*

6.322 The language throughout this line is both implicitly and explicitly sexual. Saufeia (*ipsa*, 'she') and Medullina are juxtaposed at the start; Medullina is a real upper-class cognomen (nickname) but derives from *medulla*, 'marrow', believed by Romans to be 'the seat of erotic desire' (Watson & Watson 2014 p. 174). Of the three possible words in the middle of the line, *fluctum*, 'flow', probably refers to Medullina's sexual movements, but may also imply her cunt's wetness; *frictum*, 'rub', is evocative of lesbian sex – the word 'tribad' stems from the Greek *tribō*, meaning 'rub', and was sometimes translated into Latin as *frictrix* or *fricatrix* (Boehringer 2021 pp. 255–6); and *fructum*, 'enjoyment', often refers to sexual enjoyment in Latin. Next, the participle referring to Medullina, *crisantis*, 'rocking/humping/jiggling', is the technical term in Latin for 'the motions of the [penetrated] female in intercourse' (Adams 1982 p. 136). The last word, *adorat*, may be worship or a plea – so, Saufeia enjoying Medullina's actions or asking for them. What remains unclear is whether Medullina is making her sexual movements in front of Saufeia or on top of her.

6.323 *mistresses, excellence/virtue/manliness equal to birth: Juvenal makes a joke here – virtus means 'excellence proper to a man'; in winning this contest against slave-girls/prostitutes, the high-born Saufeia and Medullina are 'excellent' but are far from 'virtuous', while the nature of their lust could be seen as 'manly'.*



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