



A SERVILE RIDDLE FROM POMPEII? (CIL 4.1877)*

ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders a graffitied riddle from Pompeii (CIL 4.1877). It argues that slavery is one possible dimension of the puzzle, and that acknowledging the existence of slavery in this text testifies to the potential of Pompeian graffiti as a source for overlooked social histories.

Keywords: Pompeii; graffiti; slavery

This article concerns a Pompeian graffito (CIL 4.1877) that has long presented a puzzle, both to its ancient audience and to modern scholars.¹ Acknowledging the possible dimension of enslavement in this text helps to unlock some of its mysteries and testifies to the potential of Pompeian graffiti as a source for hidden or overlooked social histories.

The graffito was inscribed in Pompeii's basilica. Plausibly composed in verse,² it describes itself explicitly as a riddle:

Zetema
 mulier ferebat filium similem sui
 nec meus est nec mi similat sed
 uellem esset meus
 et ^{e[lg]o} uoleba(m) ut meus esset. 5

A riddle:
 A woman bore a son like herself
 He is not mine nor is he like me but
 I wish that he were mine.
 And I have been wishing that he were mine.

Although all five lines are given as part of a single inscription in the *CIL*, and physically follow on from one another in their placement on the wall (see [fig. 1](#)), Peter Kruschwitz has shown convincingly that the final line (*et ego uoleba(m) ut meus esset, 5*) is written in a second, different, hand.³ This line may, therefore, be the first of several responses

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¹ For the most recent edition of the graffito, with full references, see H. Solin, A. Varone and P. Kruschwitz, *CIL IV Inscriptiones parietariae Pompeianae Herculanenses Stabianae. Suppl. pars 4. Inscriptiones parietariae Pompeianae. Fasc. 2* (Berlin, 2021), 1704.

² E. Courtney, *Musa Lapidaria: A Selection of Latin Verse Inscriptions* (Atlanta, 1995), 279 argues that it is based on two iambic senarii, though the metre of the second has slipped in the inscription. P. Kruschwitz, 'Patterns of text layout in Pompeian verse inscriptions', *SPhV* 11 (2008), 225–64, at 244–6 also argues that the graffito is in verse, though he disagrees with Courtney over the line divisions.

³ Kruschwitz (n. 2), 244.

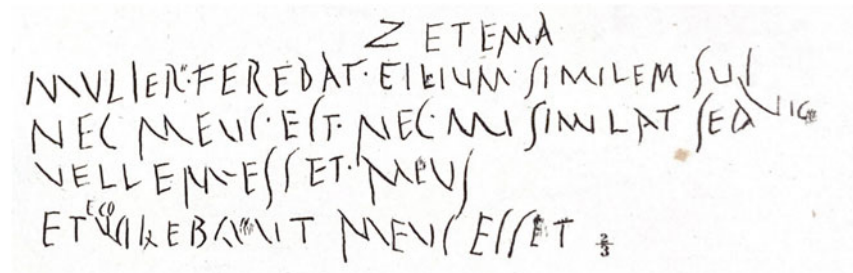


Fig. 1: Zangemeister's line drawing of *CIL* 4.1877 (Tab. XXIV 3); reproduced with permission

that the graffito invited in antiquity. Three further responses appear just above the riddle, in the same panel on the wall (*CIL* 4.1878).⁴ The topmost of these is somewhat smug and enigmatic: *zetema dissoluit* ('[s]he solved the riddle').⁵ The Latin of the second is almost impossibly scrambled, but Danielewicz's ingenious reading is one plausible attempt to make sense of the middle: *Lacris a mala pateto bis arabis a.II* ('Lacris, may you be open from the mouth; you will plough ['fuck'] twice for 2 asses'); that is, this is a reference to payment in return for sexual acts.⁶ The third response is straightforwardly base: *linge mentula(m) est* ('[the answer] is suck the dick'). This comment might simply be an expression of defiance at a riddle that evades comprehension or it might be another genuine attempt at a solution, again pointing to the riddle's potential sexual allusions.

These responses offer beguiling evidence for the attention and engagement that such graffitied puzzles attracted in their original contexts.⁷ Yet modern scholars have not been satisfied with these ancient solutions and have made their own attempts to unlock the riddle's mystery. Two main interpretations have been offered. The first is to see this as a riddle of family relationships, perhaps centred around the double meaning of *sui* as both the genitive of the reflexive pronoun *suus* and the dative of *sus*, 'pig'; beyond pointing out this pun, however, subscribers to this view have not unpacked its

⁴ The difference in letter-forms, depth and placement of the different graffitied responses suggest that each was written by a different hand: see R.R. Benefiel, 'Magic squares, alphabet jumbles, riddles and more: the culture of word-games among the graffiti of Pompeii', in J. Kwapisz, D. Petrain and M. Szymanski (edd.), *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry* (Berlin and Boston, 2012), 65–80, at 75.

⁵ The third person seems to have been common for self-reference in Pompeian graffiti: on this practice, see S. Levin-Richardson, 'Facilis hic futuit: graffiti and masculinity in Pompeii's "purpose-built" brothel', *Helios* 38 (2011), 59–78, at 65; K. Milnor, *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape in Roman Pompeii* (Oxford and New York, 2014), 161–2.

⁶ J. Danielewicz, 'A palindrome, an acrostich and a riddle: three solutions', in J. Kwapisz, D. Petrain and M. Szymanski (edd.), *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry* (Berlin and Boston, 2012), 320–34, at 331–4. Zangemeister printed the line in *CIL* as LACRIS AMALA PATIITO BIC ARABICAI (Lacris amala pateto bic arabicae). Danielewicz's main points of distinction from previous editors were to read the 'c' in *bic* and in *arabicae* as 's' and to read the final word not as *arabicae* but as *arabis a.II*. He offers several literary and graffiti parallels for his reading; other Pompeian graffiti advertising a price for sexual acts include *CIL* 4.5372 and *CIL* 4.8483.

⁷ On the interactivity of word-games at Pompeii, see Benefiel (n. 4) and R.R. Benefiel, 'Amianth, a ball-game, and making one's mark: *CIL* IV 1936 and 1936a', *ZPE* 167 (2008), 193–200.

significance.⁸ Benefiel suggests that ‘the key lies in the word *meus*, which might be understood as indicating a father–son relationship (‘I wish he were my [son]’) but could be taken in an erotic sense (‘I wish he were mine’); she does not pursue this explanation further.⁹ The second interpretation is to understand this riddle as a coded and Greek-inflected reference to money-lending, since the Greek word *τόκος* can mean either ‘child’ or ‘interest’ and the phrase *τόκον φέρειν* can mean either ‘bear a child’ or ‘produce interest’; the *mulier* would then be the original sum of money.¹⁰ On this interpretation, it is attractive to take the Greek heading *zetema* as a nudge to think bilingually in order to solve the riddle. However, although this reading makes sense of the title and the first line, it makes less sense of the rest (*nec meus ... esset meus*). It is especially unclear why the debt should be desired; indeed, most commentators adopting this explanation concentrate on the first verse alone.¹¹

But there is another possible solution, one that draws both on the evidence of the ancient solutions on the basilica wall and on elements of existing modern readings. I suggest that this is a puzzle of parentage that depends upon the hierarchy of freedom and enslavement inherent in Roman society.

The frequent and complex puzzles of parentage in literature, especially comedy, offer parallels for the puzzle our riddle poses.¹² Sexual relations involving enslaved individuals raised especially acute questions about children’s legitimacy and resemblance to their parents, with which ancient texts engaged. There are several reasons to suspect a reference to enslavement in this graffito. First is the term *mulier*: this can be a neutral term to describe a woman, but it frequently carries pejorative connotations and is often applied specifically to enslaved women.¹³ Second is the possible pun between

⁸ K. Ohlert, *Rätsel und rätselspiele der alten Griechen* (Berlin, 1912), 192; A. Taylor, ‘Riddles dealing with family relationships’, *Journal of American Folklore* 51 (1938), 25–37, at 29; B. García-Hernández, *De iure uerrino: el derecho, el aderezo culinario y al augurio de los nombres* (Madrid, 2007), 17–18, 107–8. On the regular confusion of cases in the Pompeian graffiti, see V. Vaänänen, *Le latin vulgaire des inscriptions pompéiennes* (Berlin and Boston, 1966), 115–21.

⁹ Benefiel (n. 4), 74. During my final revisions of this article, Benefiel told me (pers. comm.) that she was studying the basilica graffito further in a current book project where she will offer a reading of this graffito that coheres with mine here; we keenly await her analysis.

¹⁰ For the clearest explanation, with parallels, see Courtney (n. 2), 279. This solution was first proposed by K. Schenkl, ‘Ein pompejanisches Rätsel’, *WS* 8 (1886), 172–3; Milnor (n. 5), 179 also adopts it; Benefiel (n. 4), 74 lists it as one possible option.

¹¹ For example, Schenkl (n. 10), 173 devotes his final sentence to the second verse, but although he claims it is ‘now understandable’ he does not explain why, and just paraphrases its content. Courtney (n. 2), 279 points out that the word *adulterinus* can mean either ‘counterfeit coinage’ or ‘illegitimate offspring’; this suggestion makes sense of the second verse as thematically related to, but not directly following from, the first.

¹² See, for example, Men. *Epit.* especially 944–9 and Isae. 6.19–20, which also involve a mixture of enslaved and free individuals. Another interesting literary parallel is Stat. *Silu.* 5.5, in which Statius laments a child, originally enslaved in his household and then freed: he insists (5.5.69) that this child is his (*meus ille, meus*), even though he is explicitly not the biological father (5.5.11, 72). M. Gigante, ‘La vita teatrale nell’antica Pompei’, in I. Gallo (ed.), *Studi Salernitani in memoria di Raffaele Cantarella* (Salerno, 1981), 9–15, at 39–41 implausibly suggests a direct allusion to the *Epitrepontes* passage in our graffito, and Courtney (n. 2), 279 cites the passage as a parallel, but neither discusses the dimension of enslavement. J. Képartová, ‘Kinder in Pompeji’, *Klio* 66 (1984), 192–209, at 202 suggests that the riddle concerns an illegitimate or adopted child, but again does not consider the involvement of enslaved individuals. On the prominence of the theme of mistaken parentage—and the frequent involvement of enslaved women in these plots—in both Greek and Roman comedy, see A. Feltoich, ‘Controlling images: enslaved women in Greek and Roman comedy’, *Arethusa* 54 (2021), 73–92.

¹³ F. Bücheler, ‘Die pompejanischen Wandinschriften’, *RhM* 12 (1857), 241–60, at 258 noted that the *mulier* in this graffito might be a *meretrix* but did not discuss her legal status. For more recent and

suus and *sus*. There are linguistic and conceptual associations between pigs, sex and slavery, especially if we follow the header's prompt to think in Greek: the term σῦς (or ὕς) could denote female genitalia,¹⁴ and it is striking that the most famous and extended example of the wordplay between 'pig' and 'vulva' involves girls being sold into sexual slavery (Ar. *Ach.* 739–819).¹⁵ As we have seen, two of the ancient responses themselves perceived a sexual tinge to the riddle, including one response that may refer to payment in return for sex.¹⁶ Third, understanding this as a reference to sex between some combination of enslaved and free individuals makes sense of the content of the entire original graffito. We can imagine various possible scenarios underlying its verses. One possibility (a) is that the *mulier* refers to an enslaved woman who has borne a child by her enslaver; this child would indeed share his mother's enslaved status ('be like her' rather than like his father) and would not be recognized as his father's son, though his father might wish that he were. Alternatively (b), this could be a reference to an enslaved woman who bore a child by someone other than her enslaver, whether free or unfree; in this case her enslaver might resent the fact that the child was not 'his', since it was his prerogative to have sex with all those whom he kept enslaved.¹⁷ A third possibility (c) is that the woman herself is not enslaved but free, and has had a child with an enslaved man. This scenario might well provoke public (though anonymous) complaint from her husband; in the riddle, the associations of enslavement colouring *mulier* and *sus* are transferred from her enslaved sexual partner to the woman and her child to underline her contravention of social hierarchies.¹⁸ A fourth possibility (d) is that the *mulier* is a freedwoman who has been freed by her enslaver for the purpose of marriage and subsequently had a freeborn child with him.¹⁹ On this reading, the voice behind the

general discussions of the term *mulier*, see J.N. Adams, 'Latin words for "woman" and "wife"', *Glotta* 50 (1972), 234–55, at 235; F. Santoro L'Hoir, *The Rhetoric of Gender Terms: 'Man', 'Woman', and the Portrayal of Character in Latin Prose* (Leiden and New York, 1992). At 30–2, L'Hoir offers several examples of the term *mulier* being used to describe enslaved women, especially in Plautine comedy, including in sexual contexts; cf. 42–3, on Cicero's use of the term *mulier* to describe Sattia in the *Pro Cluentio*: slavery is also at issue here, since the focus of *Clu.* 181, 187, 191–3 is on Sattia's treatment of enslaved men. The emphatically pejorative *mulier* is one signal that through this behaviour Sattia herself has foregone her social status.

¹⁴ See J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* (Oxford and New York, 1991²), 132, who cites Ar. *Ach.* 741 and *Lys.* 683. Semon. 7.2 describes a woman born from a sow (ἐξ ὑός).

¹⁵ On the animalization of enslaved people in ancient texts in general, see K. Bradley, 'Animalizing the slave: the truth of fiction', *JRS* 90 (2000), 110–25.

¹⁶ Not all prostitutes at Pompeii were enslaved (A. Varone, 'Organizzazione e sfruttamento della prostituzione servile: l'esempio del lupanare di Pompei', in A. Buonopane and F. Cenerini [edd.], *Donna e lavoro nella documentazione epigrafica* [Faenza, 2003], 193–215, at 202–3 suggests, based on onomastics, that 20 per cent of female prostitutes in the brothel were freeborn), but there was none the less a strong association between sex-work and slavery. On the lives of prostitutes at Pompeii, see S. Levin-Richardson, 'The public and private lives of Pompeian prostitutes', in B. Longfellow and M. Swetnam-Burland (edd.), *Women's Lives, Women's Voices: Roman Material Culture and Female Agency in the Bay of Naples* (Austin, 2021), 177–96. On ancient prostitution in general, see M.F. Green, 'Witnesses and participants in the shadows: the sexual lives of enslaved women and boys', *Helios* 42 (2015), 143–62; A.K. Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World* (Cambridge, 2016).

¹⁷ Interpretations (a) and (b) rely upon the ambiguity of *meus*: the child would, of course, have been the enslaver's in terms of being his property, but was not his (legitimate) son.

¹⁸ Again, cf. Cic. *Clu.* 181, 187, 191–3 (see n. 13 above), where Sattia is described in language associated with the enslaved following allegations of her inappropriate treatment of enslaved men.

¹⁹ I am extremely grateful to *CQ*'s anonymous reader for making me consider this possibility and its implications.

riddle can be imagined as that of her enslaved partner, lamenting that the child is not his son. It might then be significant that the final line of the original graffito expresses a desire for parentage but makes no corresponding wish about the child's legal status: the child is not like the riddle's enslaved author, and there is no expressed wish for him to be so.

To summarize, a translation of each of these different possibilities—spelling out the status differences in each—might run:

- a) An (enslaved) woman gave birth to an (enslaved) child. He is not my legitimate son nor is he like me (his free father) but I wish he were my legitimate son.
- b) An (enslaved) woman gave birth to an (enslaved) child. He is not mine nor is he like me (her enslaver) but I wish he were mine.
- c) A (free) woman bore a child (with an enslaved man). He is not mine nor is he like me (her free husband) but I wish he were mine.
- d) A (freed) woman gave birth to a (free) child. He is not mine nor is he like me (her enslaved partner) but I wish he were my son.

To differing degrees, these scenarios involve transgression of social norms, either in the scenario described or in the scenario desired.²⁰ Recognizing these transgressions strengthens Kruschwitz's argument about the relationship between the form and the content of the verses. He argues that the unusual spacing of the second verse across two lines 'delayed the punchline' (*uellem esset meus*) which comes as a 'surprising twist after everything that proceeded it'.²¹ However, he does not elucidate what this twist actually is, since he does not try to solve the riddle. Understanding the twist as a desire for paternity in defiance of normative social and sexual expectations explains its surprisingness and makes the line break more pointed.

All these possible scenarios also make sense of the responses that follow our graffito as further derogatory commentary on a woman perceived as (too) sexually available: the first response, immediately following the riddle, wishes that the child was the product of a sexual encounter with him (*uoleba(m) ut meus esset*); the other two are more explicitly vulgar (see above). The feelings and agency of the woman herself are of no concern to these respondents. On reading (d), these responses are especially poignant: consciously or not and whether themselves free, freed or enslaved, ancient respondents to the riddle overlook the heartbreak of the enslaved narrator and reply with sexual jokes and interpretations—just like most modern commentators.

This interpretation of the text opens our minds to the participation of enslaved people in Pompeii's inscriptional landscape. It is notoriously difficult to be certain about who writers of graffiti were: they are frequently anonymous and even when names are given they may not be real ones.²² However, there is no reason not to assume that at least some writers and readers of Pompeian graffiti were enslaved.²³ This is especially so in light of

²⁰ The Statius parallel mentioned above (n. 12) might argue against the transgressive nature of the desire for parentage in some of these interpretations, but even there Statius must work hard to claim the child as his own; note the insistent repeated *meus*. There is also no obvious sexual element to the lament in Statius.

²¹ Kruschwitz (n. 2), 245.

²² On the anonymity of graffiti as both problem and potential, see Milnor (n. 5), 3, 4, 14 and 22. Lucian, *Dial. meret.* 4.3 describes the havoc caused by deliberate impersonation in graffiti, showing ancient awareness of the difficulties of determining authorship of these texts.

²³ For other examples of Pompeian graffiti possibly written by enslaved people, see R.R. Benefiel, 'Dialogues of ancient graffiti in the house of Maius Castricius in Pompeii', *AJA* 114 (2010), 59–101,

recent work on the integral role that enslaved people played in literary culture and production.²⁴ Our graffito offers one concrete—if necessarily speculative—case-study of how we might use these texts as micro-histories of lives and experiences that are overlooked in the mainstream historical record.²⁵

A reading of these verses as a riddle of sex, status and parentage makes it a puzzle of real-world relevance. These themes were all prominent elsewhere in the social commentary of Pompeii's graffiti. Another nearby graffito from the basilica (*CIL* 4.1860) likewise references prostitution and ownership (*quoi scripsi semel et legit mea iure puellast. quae pretium dixit non mea sed populi est*, 'The girl to whom I once wrote and who read my message is justly mine. The girl who named her price is not mine but is common property').²⁶ The acuteness of questions about the status of the (formerly) enslaved and their children is also apparent in local documentary evidence: the case of Petronia Iusta, a long-running legal dispute over whether she was born free or enslaved, is recorded in several tablets from the Casa del Bicentario in Herculaneum.²⁷ Our graffito plays right into these concerns.

Admittedly, this is not necessarily the decisive solution to the riddle. Indeed, part of the riddle's allure may be that it evades a single answer; its playfulness lies in keeping people guessing. But enslavement should be considered as one plausible dimension of the riddle's mystery, not least because it is a theme to which it is easy to be oblivious.²⁸

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at 87; S.R. Joshel and L. Hackworth Petersen, *The Material Life of Roman Slaves* (Cambridge, 2014), 76–7 and 143; at 97 they also consider enslaved people as readers of graffiti.

²⁴ Good recent work on this theme includes S. Blake, 'Now you see them: slaves and other objects as elements of the Roman master', *Helios* 39 (2012), 193–211; J.A. Howley 'Reading against the grain: book forgery and book labor at Rome', in J.N. Hopkins and S. McGill (edd.), *Forgery beyond Deceit: Fabrication, Value, and the Desire for Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 2023), 193–220; T. Kearey, 'Editing', in J. Coogan, J.A. Howley and C. Moss (edd.), *Writing, Enslavement and Power in the Roman Mediterranean* (Oxford, forthcoming). For the participation of (formerly) enslaved people in more 'popular' literary contexts we might think of the fables written by the freed Phaedrus.

²⁵ For a recent attempt to use graffiti and inscriptions to imagine the lives of enslaved sex-workers, see S. Levin-Richardson and D. Kamen, 'Epigraphy and critical fabulation: imagining narratives of Greco-Roman sexual slavery', in E. Cousins (ed.), *Dynamic Epigraphy: New Approaches to Inscriptions* (Oxford, 2022), 201–21.

²⁶ For the text, see A. Varone, *Erotica Pompeiana: Love Inscriptions on the Walls of Pompeii* (Rome, 2002), 37; Levin-Richardson (n. 16), 177.

²⁷ For a detailed discussion of the case, see A. Lintott, 'Freedmen and slaves in the light of legal documents from first-century A.D. Campania', *CQ* 52 (2002), 555–65, at 560–4.

²⁸ On the (in)visibility of evidence for slavery at Pompeii, see Joshel and Hackworth Petersen (n. 23), especially 1–23.