

Non Omnia Possumus Omnes: Martial 2.86.8

Martial uses an athletic comparison to defend his refusal to indulge in palindromes, Sotadeans, Galliambics, and other such trifles (2.86.7-8):¹

quid si per gracilis vias petauri
 invitum iubeas subire Ladan?

8 invitum *ex* invictum β *ut videtur*

On *petauri* in 7, Williams notes:²

There is some confusion as to what exactly this object was, but it was clearly a device used by acrobats or similar performers that was singularly inappropriate for distance runners like Ladas. It is located in the air at Lucil. 1298 Marx but on the ground at Manil. 5.439. Ker, Izaac, and Norcio identify it as a springboard or trampoline, Shackleton Bailey as a trapeze, Barié and Schindler and Ceronetti as a tightrope, and Scandola as a balancing beam. Alternatively, as Housman ad Manil. 5.439 proposes, *petaurus* here may refer to the acrobat himself, otherwise called *petaurista* or *petauristarius*.

It seems to me that Martial 2.86 is itself evidence that the art of the *petaurista* included tightrope-walking, though it does not exclude any of the other things listed, which would fit in a tightrope-walker's show. The contrast is most pointed if it opposes athletes who use their feet in equally amazing but very different ways: Ladas safe on the ground winning races with brute speed and no need for finesse, the *petaurista* risking his life high above the ground as he places each step slowly and carefully in just the right place.

It also seems to me that *invitum*, printed by all the editors I have seen, is deplorably redundant, and β's apparent and canceled *invictum* correct. Even the greatest of runners – even an undefeated (*invictum*) runner – would be a fool to try to run, or even walk, on a tightrope:³ unwillingness can surely be assumed. And *invitum* seems to imply that if Ladas were only willing to walk a tightrope successfully, he could do it, which is not true.

¹ I print the modern vulgate text, with apparatus adapted from Lindsay's OCT. (I changed the name of the manuscript family from B^A to β to match the modern standard, and spelled out the last word.)

² Craig A. Williams (ed.), *Martial, Epigrams, Book Two* (Oxford, 2004).

³ Ladas himself might easily end up having only *alterum pedem Ladae* (10.100.5) if he fell from even a moderately high tightrope.