

Persius 1.53: Udderly Hypocritical

A rich patron fishes for compliments (1.53-55):

calidum scis ponere sumen,
scis comitem horridulum trita donare lacerna,
et ‘verum’ inquis ‘amo, verum mihi dicite de me.’ 55

The two gifts offered as bait are oddly assorted. A worn cloak shows a suitably sordid mixture of generosity and parsimony, well worth having but far less valuable than a new one would have been. However, a hot sow’s udder is an unambiguous delicacy. Lee and Barr see the problem but try to wiggle out of it: “a popular and doubtless not over-expensive delicacy”. Kißel offers all the parallels one could wish to prove that *sumen* was “a choice delicacy” and hot “the ideal serving temperature”. It may have been popular in the sense that everyone liked it, but surely not in the sense that anyone but the rich at it often. Jenkinson’s ‘caviar’ seems a legitimate translation into modern terms.

The pairing of udder and cloak might be defended as combining gifts of approximately equal value – not that I feel qualified to calculate the value of either gift in first-century currency. When clothes were woven, cut, and sewn by hand, a new cloak would have been worth far more than a fresh-cooked sow’s udder – unlike today, when a brand new winter jacket from K-Mart may (*experto credite*) cost less than a lambburger with fries and imported Mexican Coca Cola at the hot new restaurant in town. Whether a used cloak would have been worth more or less than a fresh sow’s udder would presumably have depended on just how worn it was.

Nevertheless, this is satire, and I expect a foodstuff that is at least mildly sordid and degrading to go with the worn cloak: as I have suggested elsewhere [<http://www.curculio.org/fatale.html>], in satire and invective the rule is *lectio foedior potior*. I suggest therefore that Persius wrote *gelidum* (a polar error in more ways than one – *tepidum* would be less sordid and further from the paradosis). The patron serves his poor client a cold sow’s udder, presumably left over from dinner with rich cronies the night before. (At least he doesn’t invite the two classes of guests to the same feast to humiliate the poor ones, like Virro in Juvenal 5 or the anonymous villain of Pliny,

Epistulae 2.6.) In the days before refrigerators, a day-old udder would have been none too fresh, though still edible. Like the contents of a doggy bag from a fine restaurant today, it would have been tastier than a lot of fresh foods, while still far less attractive than it had been fresh.

Now the two gifts match: they're both cold, though in slightly different ways, both are used or at least not fresh, both would have been more welcome if given new-made (fresh from the tailor or freshly-cooked), and both are still worth having, thus putting the client firmly in his place. Or perhaps the clients: we don't know whether the recipients of udder and cloak are the same person, but identifying the two might add a bit of point. Anyone would rather have his cooked meat hot from the stove, but a man who's shivering with cold would especially appreciate any kind of hot food or drink, just to help warm up.

On the other hand, the plural *dicite* shows that two or more clients are present. Does one get the udder, the ~~udder~~ other the cloak? Or is there a whole crowd of clients, and one gets the udder, one the cloak, while the rest are sent away cold and hungry, but still hoping to be among the lucky few next time? Either way, it looks like the patron is trying to elicit some competitive flattery.