

"Interest in the Crotch:" a Reply.

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I read with interest Sean Liam Kelly's analysis of Martial 7.35 in the Fall 1993 issue of *Nexus*. Although I am in substantial agreement with many parts of Kelly's analysis, one detail of the text which he did not pick up on leads me to offer a different route to Kelly's conclusion that, according to the narrator of the poem, Laecania insults his and his slave's virility, and that in response to this perceived unmaning, he replies with the charge of lesbianism. However, the route I propose introduces into the itinerary not only issues of gender and violence, but also those of race.

The detail from which my remarks spring is that the slave's penis is described as a "Jewish load" (*Iudaeum pondus* 4). Kelly sees a distinction among penises which are covered and those which are not. This is right, but not in quite the way Kelly means. The reference to a "Jewish load" introduces a distinction between those penises which are covered by the foreskin and those which are circumcised, and thus exposed. The narrator's slave's penis is uncovered, not only in the sense that the slave is naked, but also in that he has been circumcised. This leads me to see the reference to Laecania's slave's "groin bound in soft black leather," as an allusion to the fact that the slave is both black and uncircumcised--his

foreskin is the soft, black leather that binds his penis, here metonymically referred to as his groin.

What is the significance of this contrast between the circumcised penis of the Jewish slave of the narrator and the uncircumcised one of Laecania's black slave? The question obviously arises: what of the narrator's own penis? On which side of this contrast does it fall? The relevant lines are ambiguous: "but my slave, not to mention myself... has his Jewish load dangling beneath naked skin" (3-4). Is the narrator's load Jewish as well, or not? This question is important because it is the uncircumcised penis that the narrator describes as the "only real dick" (6).

Apart from the obvious suggestion that a circumcised penis is not a real dick because it is an incomplete one, more light might be shed on the narrator's terror by considering a passage from a southern French commentary on the rabbinic *Midrash Rabbah*, dating from the end of the thirteenth century, and attributed to Rabbi Isaac b. Yedaiah.¹ Rabbi Isaac attempts to explain the statement, from *Numbers Rabbah* (12.8), that "Were [the Jews] not circumcised, they would not have been able to gaze upon the *shekinah* [the immanent aspect of God], but would have fallen down." I quote in full the editor's summary of his explanation: Rabbi Isaac "compares the sexual performance of the uncircumcised and the circumcised lover,

¹ See Marc Saperstein, "The Earliest Commentary on the *Midrash Rabbah*," in Isadore Twersky (ed.), *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

arguing that the presence of the foreskin enables a man to delay his ejaculation long enough to bring the woman to an orgasm. Because the woman derives intense pleasure from this relationship, she makes such demands upon her partner that he becomes exhausted and incapable of concentrating upon the cultivation of his intellect. In contrast, the circumcised man ejaculates quickly and fails to satisfy his partner... The woman therefore quickly loses interest in him, and he is freed from such demeaning diversions to concentrate on more important goals" (285-6).

What the contrast between the penises of the two slaves does is to introduce the opposition of two racial stereotypes: the circumcised Jew, a poor lover afflicted by chronic premature ejaculation and the potent black male, the only one with a true dick, whose availability to Laecania makes her look with scorn on the narrator. The narrator, perhaps circumcised himself, is only too aware of his own sexual inadequacy. His hostility to Laecania, and his attempt to insult her by describing her as a lesbian, are thus predicated not only on his own desire for her, but also on his acceptance of racial, sexual stereotypes.