AN OBSCENE WORD PLAY IN POMPEII

Abstract: Buecheler’s punctuation of CLE 932, along with his explanation of the distich, does not seem quite satisfying for reasons of syntax. On the other hand, the literal interpretation of this distich leaves aside an obvious absurdity. I have therefore proposed an explanation founded on obscene use of the words matella and meiere in Roman slang.

On a wall in Pompeii, an ancient guest of a nearby deversorium has left the following message:

Miximus in lecto: fateor, peccauimus, hospes.
Si dices “quare”, nulla matella fuit.

It seems to be a mocking response to some piece of Pompeian inn-keepers’ poetry, the purpose of which was to proclaim actual rules of behaviour in the house, or simply remind the guests of good manners. I shall here discuss two points concerning the correct reading of the distich and its real meaning respectively.

Buecheler (CLE 932) punctuates the distich as follows:

Miximus in lecto, fateor, peccauimus, hospes,
si dices quare nulla matella fuit.

arguing that the second sentence means ‘I’ll admit it wasn’t fair of me, [but only] if you explain why there was no chamber pot [in my room]’, and seemingly rejecting the other reading (‘minus apte dices dictum est si hanc accipis sententiam: peccauimus, sed si quaeres qua re, defuit matella’). Still, the evaluation of si dices: ‘quare?’ as ‘minus apte dictum’ does not prove there is a real need for a different reading. In fact, Buecheler’s remark is less of a reading proposal than an aesthetic judgement, as the many instances are where he points at happier wordings overlooked by the authors of epigraphic poems. In cultivated poetry we should of course expect a more elegant turn,
such as _quaesieris quare_ (cf. Prop. III 22,14); but in colloquial style it is by no means unusual for a direct question to be introduced by _dicere_ instead of _quaerere_ or _rogare_: so e.g. Cic. Att. IV 2, 5 _dices_: 

*quid igitur causae fuit?*. Moreover, Buecheler's reading _fateor_. _si dices_ implies an atypical combination of the future and the _praesens pro futuro_ tenses in the hypothetic period, common patterns being _siFut2+Praes_ (cf. Pl. Rud. 168 _saluae sunt si illos fluctus deuitaurint_; Poen. 671 _rex sum si ego illum_. _ad me allexero_), and _siPraes+Fut1_ (cf. Pl. Aul. 644 _id quoque iam fiel nisi fatere_; Asin. 193 _si mihi dantur duo talenta_. _hanc tibi noctem dabo_). 

Independently of the above, we may search for the real meaning of this distich. In fact, the very idea _miximus in lecto, [nam] nulla matella fuit_, if interpreted literally, seems to be quite absurd. A different interpretation is therefore necessary. It is known that in Petr. 45, 8 _magis illa matella digna fuit quam taurus iactaret_ the word _matella_ means 'prostitute'. (Buecheler also recognized an allusion to this meaning in Mart. XII 32, 13 _matella curto rupta latere meiebat_; and although _matella_ here retains its primary meaning of a 'chamber pot', obscene allusions are beyond doubt if we consider the co-occurrence of _rupta latere_, harmless at first sight, but clearly reminiscent of the slang expression _rumpere latus_, cf. Mart. XI 104, 6.) The other key word, the verb _meiere_, also had an obscene acception in Roman slang, namely 'ejaculate' (cf. Catul. 67, 30–31 _egregium nar ras mira pietate parentem qui ipse sui gnati minxerit in gremium_; Hor. S. II 7, 51–52 _ne ditior aut formae melioris meiat eodem_). Obscene acceptions of both _matella_ and _meiere_ seem to reflect a more general tendency of conveying sex-related meanings to other words in the field as well, cf. _cacare_ 'pedicari' (Priap. 69, 4; CIL X 8145), _uesica_ 'cunnus' (Juv. I 139; VI 64). So the Pompeian distich appears to be as far from absurdity as from decency: it is an objection to the inn-keeper who did not care to provide sexual entertainment for his clients.

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3 For these and other examples see Kühner-Stegmann II, pp. 119, 146.