

## CIL IV 6892

This article examines the text and meaning of an anonymous epigram from Pompeii, with particular attention to the problem of what the word *mora* here means. Earlier explanations of the poem by Wick, Zangemeister, and Zottoli are discussed and found wanting. Various new possibilities are canvassed, with preference given to any one of several erotic interpretations.

quisquis amat nigras nigris carbonibus ardet;  
Nigram cum uideo mora libenter edo.

This inscription has been several times translated, rarely discussed, and never explained. Some possibilities were explored by G. Zottoli in an article written more than seventy years ago<sup>1</sup>. Recently, F. M. Snowden adduced the poem in a discussion of black women in Greece and Rome; he called it puzzling, cited only Zottoli, and left it at that<sup>2</sup>. There seems to be nothing else. The present paper provides an analysis of the language, surveys the theories of Zottoli, and offers some new suggestions.

The text is not beyond dispute. In the first line, *nigras* has been read as *nigram*, and vice versa with *nigram* in the second. And in one or both cases, *nigram* has been read as the proper name Nigram<sup>3</sup>. Certitude is obviously impossible. In my opinion, the epigrammatic

<sup>1</sup> G. Zottoli, «Lusus Pompeianus», *Atene e Roma* 11, 1908, pp. 357-60.

<sup>2</sup> *Blacks in Antiquity*, Harvard 1970, p. 328, n. 149.

<sup>3</sup> *Nigram* is read in both lines by M. Della Corte, *Loves and Lovers in Ancient Pompeii*, Naples 1960, p. 62, and by M. D'Avino, *The Women of Pompeii*, Naples 1967, p. 60. Zottoli declared himself indifferent to the question. Snowden cites all the above without comment or commitment. It should be observed that *Nigra* is not all that common a name; it is absent from (e. g.) Forcellini's *Onomasticon*; D. C. Swanson, *The Names in Roman Verse*, Wisconsin 1967; and the index to *CIL* IV (!). I. Kajanto, *Latin Cognomina*, Helsinki 1965, p. 228, notes 6 unspecified occurrences, 5 in *CIL* VIII (2231, 3930, 16404, 16747, 19159 — I add these references for the reader's sake), and the sixth presumably the present one.

nature of the poem demands a pointed contrast between dark girls in general and one in particular. Also, the plural *nigras* may go more happily with the following *nigris*. Hence the text as given above.

Wick<sup>4</sup> held that the graffito had a magical purpose: «non solum candidas puellas se praeferre, sed nigras omnino timere et adversus eas mora edere solere tamquam amuletum fassus est». This view of the writer's intent was dismissed by Zangemeister (the *CIL* editor) as an example of *ineptiae*. But Zangemeister offered no discussion, and did not himself venture beyond the limp conclusion that «mora memorat scriptor quia nigra sunt».

Zottoli rejected the magical interpretation on the grounds that such a practice is nowhere else attested. An eminently reasonable point, although it overlooks the possibility of a piece of local folklore, or even a personal superstition on the part of the writer.

Noting from a passage of Serenus Sammonicus<sup>5</sup> that *carbo* can mean *carbunculus*, Zottoli toyed with the idea of a medical explanation. When the writer sees a dark girl, he eats blackberries as an apotropaic. This is a possibility. Indeed, it can be enhanced by reference to the elder Pliny who recommended *mora* as a cure for diseases of the mouth<sup>6</sup>. Which in turn could comport the notion of infectious kisses.

Another proposition advanced by Zottoli is that *nigram* in the first line stands for *mala* or *perfida*: girls in general are bad. Then, a punning contrast provides a special girl (*nigram* or *Nigram*) whom the writer can happily love.

Zottoli himself plumped for an explanation whereby the hexameter sets down a blanket statement about dark girls, with *carbonibus* hinting at the proverbial *carbonem pro thesauro inuenire*<sup>7</sup>. In the pentameter, the exceptional quality of Nigra inspires the writer to love, however unwillingly.

The thought would be consonant with that of *CIL* IV 1520: *Candida me docuit nigras odisse puellas / odero si potero: si non, inuitus amabo*. This Propertian parody, it may be noted, is frequently encountered on the walls of Pompeii<sup>8</sup>. And a patent Catullan overtone of *odi et amo* can easily be subjoined.

<sup>4</sup> F. C. Wick, «Vindiciae carminum Pompeianorum», *Atti d. R. Acc. d. Arch. Lett. e B. Arti di Napoli* 26, 1908, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> *Horrendum magis est perimit quod corpora carbo* (text in Baehrens, *FPR* 3, 120).

<sup>6</sup> *NH* XXIV 120; cf. XXIV 117 for *mora* as a remedy against *scorpiones*.

<sup>7</sup> Phaedrus V 6, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *CIL* IV 1520, 1523, 1526, 1528, 1536.

An outburst against dark girls is all too plausible. There is respectable literary pedigree. It is sufficient to quote from an Ovidian catalogue of insults: *turgida, si plena est, si fusca est, nigra uocetur*<sup>9</sup>.

With this in mind, a variant upon Zottoli's explanation may be preferred. *Carbo* can connote adverse criticism. Horace (*Serm.* II 3, 246) and Persius (V 108) are usually cited for this meaning. Plautus, however, provides the best and most pertinent example: *impleantur elegeorum meae fores carbonibus* (*Merc.* 409). Our writer is saying that the lover of dark girls incurs a black reputation. *Nigra*, by contrast, makes him change his mind. On this reckoning, *mora* is not the word for berries, but a latinised version of  $\mu\omega\rho\alpha$ , with something like *uerba* understood. For *edo* in the context of eating words, it is again Plautus who affords the parallel: *nimum libenter* (an adverb noticeable in the present discussion) *edi sermonem tuqm* (*Aul.* 536). A Graecism in the vernacular of Pompeii will occasion no surprise. If, indeed, one has to call it that: Plautus uses the adjective at least three times in Latin dress<sup>10</sup>.

This interpretation carries with it the advantage of ridding the poem of these perplexing berries. For readers who wish to retain them, other prospects will be found below. A general difficulty, as by now will be obvious, is whether to take the poem as amatory or satirical in tone. The opening phrase, for notable instance, is ubiquitous in Pompeian verses<sup>11</sup>. Perhaps the most relevant case is *CIL IV 1898*: *quisquis amat calidis non debet fontibus uti/nam nemo, flammis ustus, amare potest*. Is the graffito under discussion a sincere effort in this genre, or a parody thereof?

The problem posed by *mora* should not lead us to neglect the first line. For exactly what does *nigris carbonibus* mean? Various alternatives offer for those who do not fancy the explanation advanced earlier. It might simply be descriptive of the passions evoked by black women. Or pejorative. Logically, black coals ought to be cold ones which the charms of black girls are incapable of inflaming<sup>12</sup>. Dormant fires of love are a literary cliché, the most striking example being furnished by this epigram of Asclepiades (*AP V 210*)<sup>13</sup>:

<sup>9</sup> *Rem. Am.* 327; cf. Theocritus X 27 (with Gow's note).

<sup>10</sup> *Men.* 571; *Mil.* 370; *Trin.* 669.

<sup>11</sup> *CIL IV* 1824, 1898, 3199, 3200, 4091, 4200, 4659, 4663, 5186, 5272, 6782.

<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. J. C. Yardley, for discussion of this point.

<sup>13</sup> On this epigram, ultimately deriving (in part) from Pindar, fr. 123 Snell, see W. Ludwig, «Kunst der Variation im Liebesepigramm», *L'Épigramme Grecque*, Fondation Hardt, Geneva 1968, p. 316, n. 2. For the fires of love in Greek poetry, see Gow on Theocritus XI 51.

Τῷ θαλλῷ Διδύμη με συνήρπασεν· ὦ μοι. ἐγὼ δὲ  
 τήκομα, ὡς κηρὸς πᾶρ πυρί, κάλλος ὄρων.  
 εἰ δὲ μέλαινα, τί τοῦτο; καὶ ἄνθρακες· ἄλλ' ὅτ' ἐκείνους  
 θάλωμεν, λάμπουσ' ὡς βόδεια κάλυκες.

Or *nigris carbonibus* could be obscene. There is (unsurprisingly) no lack of vulgar language in the Pompeian graffiti<sup>14</sup>. Certainly, an obscene meaning can be found for *mora* without undue strain. It is a flexible term, equalling amongst other things the Greek συκάμινον, which in turn can stand for σῦκον. Now «fig» is used of the genitalia of either sex<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, *edo* and compounds are frequent in sexual senses<sup>16</sup>. On this view, either the writer is attracted to Nigra and would like to practise cunnilingus upon her, or he is repelled and would rather devour his own organ, i. e. masturbate<sup>17</sup>.

A final corollary. According to the *Suda*<sup>18</sup>, one meaning of the verb συκοφαντεῖν is κνίζειν ἐρωτικῶς. So perhaps the writer of our graffito was employing *mora edo* as a Latin equivalent, complimenting Nigra on her ability to arouse him. This would involve a false scansion of the verb *edere*. Metrical error might be thought unlikely in one who seems to have been alive to at least some literary motifs<sup>19</sup>. Until, that is, we note that he was apparently unable to spell *edo*, whichever verb and meaning be in question<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> The *index vocab.* to *CIL* IV furnishes many examples.

<sup>15</sup> Notably in Aristophanes, *Pax* 1349-50; cf. J. J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse*, Yale 1975, pp. 118, 155.

<sup>16</sup> Apuleius, *Met.* VIII 26, 12: *caue ne solus exedas tam bellum scilicet pul-lulum*; cf. P. Perruques, *Glossarium Eroticum Linguae Latinae*, Paris 1826, p. 203. «Eat» is also used in a sexual sense in American vernacular.

<sup>17</sup> The complimentary tone could be retained here by regarding the writer as masturbating out of frustrated desire for Nigra.

<sup>18</sup> S 1329 Adler (citing Plato *comicus* and Menander).

<sup>19</sup> In addition to the various literary parallels adduced above, it might be thought that the author of the graffito has chosen his words with some care. *Carbo* and *libenter* occur only here in the *index vocab.* to *CIL* IV, and probably so does *morum* (missing from the index).

<sup>20</sup> The last word in the inscription is transcribed by Zangemeister and others as (a) ed (e) o. *Ae* is a common error for *e*; cf. index xiii (*grammatica*) to *CIL* IV. For a detailed look at Pompeian poetry (albeit not the epigram in question), see D. O. Ross, «Nine Epigrams from Pompeii», *YCS* 21, 1969, pp. 127-42.