

At the beginning of the *Corpus Priapeorum* we hear the voice of a poet who presents his verses as graffiti scribbled on the walls of Priapus' temple (c. 2). Even though he denies the bookish character of the collection by stating that his *carmina* are “worthy of a garden, not a *libellus*” (2.2), a book is the very medium in which we encounter them. For a long time the *communis opinio* was that the *Carmina Priapea* were a (more or less random) anthology of texts by different authors, but as far back as 1962 V. Buchheit (*Studien zum Corpus Priapeorum*) convincingly argued that the epigrams were written and artfully arranged by a single poet. More recently, G. Kloss (*Hermes* 131: 464-85) and N. Holzberg (*Hermes* 133: 368-81) have provided further arguments for the artistic unity of the collection. None of them, however, has paid particular attention to the curious concept of “Priapean poetics,” which can be regarded as a constitutive element of the corpus. In my paper I suggest that the author deliberately evokes a material setting that perfectly suits the alleged artlessness of his poetry: the idea that the poems are graffiti is consistent with the lowbrow and obscene content of the epigrams and the roughly carved statue of Priapus can be seen as an emblem of their (supposedly) unpolished nature.

The poet's profession of artlessness, however, turns out to be nothing but generic pretence, undermined by the very elegance of the verses, their sophistication and learnedness. Imagining his poems as mere scrawlings on a wall, he seemingly goes one step further than those epigrammatists who composed fictive epitaphs and dedicatory inscriptions. The notion of randomly distributed graffiti contradicts the very idea of a carefully arranged Roman poetry book, but the temple itself might be read as standing for the *libellus* we are holding in our hands. Thus the invitation to enter Priapus' sanctuary (c. 14) can be understood as a postponed proem, which summons us to read the collection. As readers we are cast in the role of wanderers, the traditional addressees of inscribed poetry, and are admitted into Priapus' realm – as opposed to the thieves whom the god constantly tries to fight off.

The “anti-book poetics,” that is programmatically proclaimed in c. 2, is also present in the god's famous dictum: *libros non lego, poma lego* (68.2). While playing on the double meaning of *legere* (to read/collect), the line might contain a further pun on the Greek word *poema*. I show how the combination of fruit and poetry, which clearly fits the context of Priapus' “garden art,” is anticipated in two preceding epigrams: whereas the speaker of c. 60 observes that Priapus would be richer than Alcinous, if only he had as many *poma* as he has verses, an apple tree laments its sterility in c. 61, which is due to the fact that its branches have to bear the *carmina pessimi poetae*. Verses then take over the function of apples – incidentally, the witty juxtaposition of these two poems can be seen as evidence for the necessity of a linear reading.

Obviously Priapus is anything but a refined character in the Alexandrian sense. Accordingly, he states *crassa Minerva mea est* (3.10) – in my view the adjective *crassus* can be regarded as an exact equivalent of the Greek *παχύς*, which famously features in Callimachus' *Aitia*-prologue, where the concept of *παχύτης* or “thickness” is rejected in favor of a *Μοῦσα λεπταλέη*. It is remarkable that the very word is picked up again at the end of the collection: in 80.1 it refers to the *mentula* of someone (presumably the poet), which is evidently lacking in length. In my paper I illustrate how this last epigram lends itself to a metapoetical reading and provides an effective conclusion to the corpus.

Far from being a random anthology of different authors, the *CP* thus turns out to be a witty and sophisticated *libellus*, which is not only given coherence by metrical and thematic links, but also by the presence of a distinct and peculiar poetological discourse.