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Even Better than the Real Thing: *Herodas 6*

The ancient Greeks' seemingly flagrant and ubiquitous exposure of the phallus has fuelled much debate concerning the politics of display, nudity and representation. In accounting for such visibility, *loci classici*, such as Aristophanes' plays, usually receive most scholarly attention. This paper, however, will spotlight *Herodas 6*, a little read poem that has a lot to say about the *membrum virile*.

Herodas' *Sixth Mimiamb* features two women, Metro and Koritto, who are in search of a dildo. Metro asks her confidante where she acquired that marvellous dildo she has lent to a mutual friend. In reference to the wonderful implements she found at the manufacturer's, Koritto exclaims that "they were firmer than the real article" (Headlam's translation) - a line of central importance to the fun and games of the poem. Readings of Herodas have consistently concentrated on how (un)realistic his characterisations and use of language are. Herodas either presents us with golden nuggets of quotidian life and language (cf. Arnott, *Greece and Rome* 18 (1971) 121-32), or merely a male fantasy of low-life/feminine behaviour and conversation (cf. Finnegan *Hermathena* 192 (1992) 21-37). Indeed the *Mimiamboi*, as mimesis, constantly interrogate their relationship to so-called reality. Herodean scholarship, which the text itself so wittily anticipates, continually question whether these poems act as a substitute for reality or signify the complete lack of it. And *Mime 6* plays with both sorts of critical response (represented by Arnott and Finnegan) in its own particular way.

In reading the poem we will observe the more common word for dildo – "olisbos" – never actually appears in the poem. Instead Metro asks Koritto where she got her "baubon" (Her.6.19) from. Headlam's commentary *ad loc.* coolly notes, "baubon = olisbos". Headlam's equation skates over the games in reading this double entendre. Indeed, this short poem is packed with puns and smutty jokes, as critics such as Stern (*GBRS* 20 (1979) 247-54) have pointed out. Interestingly, the meaning of a double entendre is always suspended between substitution and lack. On the one hand, the production of meaning gets (lewdly) out of control, substituting one meaning for another. On the other hand, the double entendre teases the reader with the possibility that any hidden meaning doesn't exist at all, that is, it is entirely lacking - only present in the reader's (dirty) mind. And Metro's mode of expression not only reflects this state of affairs, but the very object her language problematically represents, itself oscillates between signifying substitution and lack: from *Lysistrata* 109, where the dildo decidedly represents the lack of a phallus, to Herodas' *Sixth Mime* where Koritto would have slept with the manufacturer to get hold of one. Either the dildo perfectly supplements - even outstrips - the original phallus or it represents an irritating absence. In alluding to this situation, Herodas' dildo questions how close it comes to the real thing, just as the *Mimes* as a whole interrogate their position to the reality they purport to mime. Our search for meaning through the dense tricky language in the text mirrors Metro and Koritto's chase for a dildo. As the poem's narrative teasingly and continually defers the moment when any dildo is actually found, the ironies in expressing, representing – even

revealing ‐ a dildo in language highlight the problems and complexities any exposure of the phallus posed to the ancient Greeks.