

Review Essay

Gilles Courtieu

Vagises' Virtuous Hand: An Unforeseen Note on Plutarch, *Life of Crassus* 18, 3

When Crassus met the Parthian ambassador Vagises on the eve of his disastrous expedition ending at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC, Vagises mocked his boldness and showed the palm of his hand, on which, according to him, no hair would ever grow unless the Roman were to reach Mesopotamia, the heart of Parthian empire. This bizarre gesture and statement, usually assumed to be frivolous, can only be understood in the context of Zoroastrian sexual and cathartic ethics, which of course no Roman or Greek could understand. The source of this information therefore could not have been Plutarch, but rather someone conversant with Persian culture, from either Parthian or Armenian stock.

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Humor needs no explanation, for then it loses both its *vis comica* and its *raison d'être*. Nevertheless, when such a clarification solves a hitherto unexplained enigma, it is worth dissecting ancient wit, an antique jest in which numerous implications lie concealed.

The story begins with a short exchange in a small town called Nicephorion (later, Raqqa), during the winter of 54–53 BC between Crassus and Vagises, an obscure Parthian ambassador, on the eve of Crassus' catastrophic attempted invasion. Previously, as Josephus informs us, the otherwise insignificant *imperator* had plundered the region, including even the Temple of Jerusalem.¹ Then, commanding an imposing force, he began his march eastwards, to the banks of the Euphrates river, the long-standing border with the Parthian Empire.

Their respective speeches do not merely inform us about strategy and diplomacy: they also allow a glimpse at the (strict) Zoroastrian doctrine on sexual (im)purity, albeit in a rather amusing fashion. The use of humor in such contexts is hardly surprising, as these kinds of topics provoke shame, alienation, diversional strategies, and, of course, ultimately hilarity.

Gilles Courtieu is Maître de Conférences, Histoire ancienne, Université Jean Moulin Lyon III. The author is especially grateful to R. M. Kerr and C. A. Segovia for their stylistic improvements of this text.

Figure 1. L. G. Portman's engraving of the exchange between Crassus and Vagises, 1800.



Source: M. Stuart, *Romeinsche geschiedenissen*. Amsterdam, 1800, 262 (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, public domain).

Speeches

Let us begin with the ambassador Vagises. He was the leader of a small group of Parthians sent by King Orodes II to warn Crassus and to prevent him from proceeding with his conquest.² Specific Zoroastrian elements can be detected at the incipit of his speech which already point us in the right direction: the emissaries used subtle and profound notions like justice, truth, lies, pity, and philanthropy to convince Crassus, although this dialogue, it would seem, was far too sophisticated for him.³

Yet we know almost nothing about Vagises except that he was the elder, and hence the head of the delegation (as was the convention). As for his name, it is clearly Parthian/Persian and from Zoroastrian stock.⁴

Of course, the Roman proconsul did not understand these subtleties, and so he provoked Vagises by telling him he would answer his alien verbiage only after his (victorious) arrival in Seleucia (situated near the Parthian capital, Ctesiphon) as conqueror. The Parthian responded to this provocation in his own way, and his “words,” which

he uttered while laughing, present some likewise provocative, and perhaps even obscene, overtones. To be sure, a Parthian ambassador's duty was to impress his Roman adversaries and here humor proved itself again a most effective weapon: "When hair grows on my palms ..." he exclaimed, while his delegation laughed. Vagises actually risked a lot, as previously Orobazes, another Parthian ambassador, who was humiliated by Sulla in quite similar circumstances, paid for his insolence with his life after returning to his king.⁵ Vagises had seemingly learnt from that incident.

No scholar has previously undertaken any explanation of this rather odd locution, connecting the growth of "hair" to the "palm" of the hand—as though it lacked importance and its sense was obvious. Broadly speaking, the expression seems to imply that the situation envisaged by the Roman emperor is absolutely inconceivable for the Parthian ambassador: it is similar to the expressions "When pigs fly ..." or "*Quand les poules auront des dents*," of which it could be taken to be a kind of Parthian variant. However, it actually implies much more than that, as we shall see. This figure of speech is commonly called an *adynaton*, and it is possible Shakespeare himself repeated this one.⁶

Had the phrase's true meaning been known to any scholar or even to Plutarch himself (which I very much doubt), there would be little mystery. However, its correct interpretation seems to have gone unnoticed until now. Nowadays, though, no scientific issue should be avoided due to any sort of puritan censorship; moreover, Zoroastrianism as a religious system, along with its fundamental cathartic principles, is now much better understood.⁷

The text from Plutarch's *Life of Crassus* reads:

πρὸς ταῦτα Κράσσου κομπάσαντος, ὡς ἐν Σελευκείᾳ δώσει τὰς ἀποκρίσεις, γελάσας ὁ πρεσβύτατος τῶν πρέσβεων Οὐαγίσης καὶ τῆς χειρὸς ὑπτιὰς δείξας τὸ μέσον, ἐντεῦθεν εἶπεν ὡ Κράσσε φύσσονται τρίχες πρότερον ἢ σὺ ὅπει Σελεύκειαν.

Against these [words], Crassus boasted that he will give his answers in Seleucia. Laughing, Ouagises, the elder of the emissaries, after turning his right hand upward and showing the middle [of it], said:—"O Crassus, hairs will grow there before you will see Seleucia."⁸

The use of direct speech adding authenticity to Vagises' expression.

Later, Dio Cassius narrates the same scene with some small yet nonetheless significant differences:⁹

καὶ αὐτῷ τῶν Πάρθων τις ἐς τὴν χεῖρα τὴν ἀριστερὰν τοῖς τῆς ἐτέρας δακτύλοις κρούσας εἶπεν ὅτι θᾶσσον ἐντεῦθεν τρίχες ἀναφύσουσιν ἢ σὺ ἐν Σελευκείᾳ γενήσῃ

and one of the Parthians, after striking his left hand with the other one's fingers told him that "hairs will grow again more quickly than you will be in Seleucia."

The wording differs from one version to the other, with Dio's omissions and the addition of some supplementary details: although the Parthian's name goes unmentioned in his version, we read in it that the Parthian showed his left hand, the impure one. Although introduced by ὅτι, the direct style is retained, whereas the verb ἀναφύω implies the repetition of action: "to grow again". Yet Dio absurdly suggests that hair can actually grow on the palm of the hand(s), and faster indeed than the time it would eventually take the *imperator* to fight his way to Seleucia. The text shows how very superficial and fanciful Dio's reading of his source is, as well as his complete ignorance of the real meaning of the expression in question.

Hairs

What could be at the same time so funny, powerful, and direct (for humor often provides a means to get straight to the point) in this unique allusion to "hair" growing on the "palm" of a hand? First, just to eradicate any misunderstanding, it must be noted that this is physiologically impossible: the skin on the palm is too thick for hair follicles – this is also true of apes. And indeed, Vagises expected that to remain the case. As for Greco-Roman culture, it is of no help at all in this matter: the phrase is absent in the Greco-Roman world, even in the crudest comedies dealing with bodily hair for the purposes of humor or disgust.¹⁰ A first conclusion to be drawn, therefore, is that, as has often been suspected, Plutarch himself merely transmitted the phrase as a humorous oddity without understanding it.¹¹

Thus we must look to the Parthian world, east of the Euphrates: it is there that we should be able to find some clues to help us understand the meaning of this turn of phrase and why it was seemingly so funny to the Parthians. And of course, if this field is to be explored, then by necessity the Persian and Zoroastrian worlds must be incorporated into the investigation, since the Parthians, even if they were not ethnically Persian, were proud of their Achaemenid heritage and furthermore practiced the Zoroastrian religion, albeit with some modifications¹²—this clarification is necessary at this point.

Let us then begin with bodily hair, and more precisely with male bodily hair. As often with such issues, its growth and its use depended on fashion, particular circumstances, as well as its exact location on the body. There are enough male figures preserved in Parthian art to state that a moustache or a beard—even quite a large one—and long hair down to the collar were valued as signs of masculinity and which furthermore helped the Parthians distinguish themselves from bald and clean-shaven Romans like Crassus. In short, some hair was thought by the Parthians to be the mark of a powerful man.¹³ However, hairy hands were a different matter altogether.

Zoroastrianism taught a stricter doctrine about the growth and use of male bodily hair.¹⁴ Firstly, when removed from the body, i.e. cut, shed, or otherwise lost, a single

hair (and by extension all hair) was considered *nasu*, in other words dead and filthy matter.¹⁵ It was definitely not a joking matter, but a potential threat to purity, a source of uncleanness.

Furthermore, Zoroastrian texts often discuss defilement and the question of hair occurs repeatedly, be it cut or uncut. It is thus clear that the incongruous and unexpected appearance of hair on a body would have certainly been viewed as shameful. Moreover, in the *Avesta* the dogma on hair is clear – the *Vendīdād* considers it a dirty element, among other evil substances:

If worshippers of Mazda want to till that piece of ground again, to water it, to sow it, and to plough it, what shall they do?

Ahura Mazda answered: “They shall look on the ground for any bones, hair, dung, urine, or blood that may be there.”¹⁶

In the same document, it is furthermore considered to be a vehicle of defilement: “and the holy Ratu shall proclaim to the worshippers of Mazda thus: ‘Worshippers of Mazda, let the urine be brought here wherewith the corpse-bearers there shall wash their hair and their bodies!’”¹⁷ It is thus compulsory to treat every last hair on the whole body: “Then shall they wait until he is dried even to the last hair on the top of his head.”¹⁸

In turn, *Fargard XVII* of the same collection treats in detail the manner in which shed hair and nail clippings ought to be dealt with, and why this is of utmost importance:

Zarathushtra asked Ahura Mazda: O Ahura Mazda, most beneficent Spirit, Maker of the material world, thou Holy One! Which is the most deadly deed whereby a man offers up a sacrifice to the Daevas? Ahura Mazda answered: It is when a man here below, combing his hair or shaving it off, or paring off his nails, drops them in a hole or in a crack.¹⁹

Unsurprisingly, then, in the *Šāyest nē šāyest* it is said that one single hair from a corpse is enough to defile everything around it.²⁰ Some isolated hair found, for instance, in a jar, is enough to make it unsuitable for use.²¹ And, as a dangerous agent, hair could even be metaphorically transformed into a sharp dagger.²²

Secondly, imaginary beings, when covered with hair were seen as being akin to animals, and were thus viewed as demons. The Zoroastrian texts often stated, for example, that the *dēw* were covered with hair.²³ Additionally, in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*²⁴ there is a scene in which an extremely ugly character, an otherwise unnamed Persian soldier, is the butt of various jokes and depicted as being entirely covered with hair. Later literature in Pahlavi foretells that the future enemies of Iran will be hairy and unshaven.²⁵ Even in more recent times, evil creatures in Iranian folklore are said to be hairy.²⁶ Thus unexpected hair growth is clearly an ominous sign.

In general, then, in the Iranian cultural milieu described here, one did not joke about cut or shed hair—the witty Vagises being the seeming exception.

Sins

Seemingly hair was anything but an insignificant detail in this ancient culture. Notwithstanding, it remains to be explained how it might have taken growth on Vagises' palm. Hair growing in improper places was considered a punishment for some major, unrevealed sin. Certainly such hair growth was viewed as indicative of some carnal sin, and was directly and publicly associated with shame, or at least moral discomfort (which often results in humor).

But for which sin was such an affliction meted out? The answer is clear, and in fact deliberately and fittingly connected to the penalty, as it affects the hand. In Iran and India, the sin of masturbation (more so than sodomy, the other common non-fertile sexual act)²⁷ is said to cause hair to grow as a retribution.²⁸ Thus T. Daryaei writes:

By contrast, growth of hair in unwanted areas such as inside the mouth, and on the palms as a blemish. This may explain the idea in Iran, that excessive masturbation may lead to hair-growth on the palms of the masturbators' hands.²⁹

This notion has survived over the years to become what we might today call an urban legend, and is in fact widespread in both Iran and English-speaking areas, where it is nevertheless no longer taken seriously—and is usually alluded to with a smile. In ancient times though, even if a man like Vagises could crack a joke about it, the issue was very important, and the way in which he expressed it implies that he did not sully with the very substance of the religious creed behind it – either Vagises, the protagonist of this episode (or Artawazd II of Armenia, as I suspect he was the main source of this account).

Masturbation was considered a major sin not on account of its connection with sexual pleasure (Zoroastrianism is quite open to the latter, as it claims to celebrate all manner of happiness)³⁰ but more fundamentally because the waste of human seed was considered an absolute and cosmogonic sacrilege. In this sense masturbation is worse than the mere production of *nasu* or dead matter, for semen is deemed to be creative life, and hence should not be transformed into dry³¹ and dead matter in order to satisfy some private fantasy. Therefore, masturbation is a crime against life, creation, and thus an aggression against the divine action of Ahura-Mazda, this being the reason why Zoroastrianism strictly forbids it.³² The case is even worse if semen comes into contact with other rejected matter,³³ so that demons might take advantage of the situation, as J. K. Choksy reminds us: "the emission of semen during intercourse, masturbation or nocturnal pollution was thought to result in impurity because the semen is seized by the Corpse Demones."³⁴

Significantly, a Zoroastrian myth tells the story of Ahriman's evil handiwork visited upon the world as the result of his masturbation.³⁵ In turn, Zarathustra's own

ejaculation, as well as Gayomart's and his bull's, all placed in a cosmogonic context, were thought to be the result of supernatural hierogamies instead of ordinary, human-like acts.³⁶ Thus, in the *Ardā Wirāz-nāmag* demons are described not only as hirsute but also as producing semen abnormally.³⁷

For humans, the rules to be observed are expressed for the most part in the *Vendīdād*, which mentions semen emissions while sleeping and night-soiled hands (18/46), as well as prayers to prevent them.³⁸ Even in the twentieth century, this trouble can put an end to night-time celebrations for those who are unable to control themselves.³⁹ Of course, for priests the situation is even more arduous, as noted by M. Boyce, because they partake in rituals and therefore the prohibition they endure is perpetual.⁴⁰

Finally, deeds that are considered evil will be—theoretically at least—punished severely because they jeopardize the whole community.⁴¹ It is thus hardly surprising that this would later influence the Talmudic injunctions on wasted semen in Sassanian Babylonia.⁴²

More than 2,000 years later, the true meaning and cultural-religious background of Vagises' words can now be readily understood. Their actual nature explains why this could not easily have been provided by a respectable historian of ancient Persia, such as Plutarch. The consequences in fact exceed the scale of this episode of diplomatic wit. Firstly, it is further evidence of the Parthian adherence to Zoroastrian traditions increasingly taken into account, here in the case of one distinguished individual. Secondly, it shows how Zoroastrianism could permeate the thoughts, the speech, and the acts of its followers, especially, as here, through sudden, unexpected humor, which gives an insight into contemporary popular humor with regard to the strict religious obligations duties and the most terrible fears. It reminds us that the trouble caused severe religious doctrines can be dealt with in everyday life by lighthearted wit. Thirdly, it brings more authenticity to the whole scene, as Plutarch could not have borrowed such a witticism from, say, Rome or Chaeroneia. Plutarch's informant must instead have been someone fully aware of Persian and Zoroastrian culture, even in its most obscure aspects.

My own contention is that Plutarch's source was King Artawazd II of Armenia, a participant of and witness to the final stages of Crassus' expedition,⁴³ who was himself a Zoroastrian. The comparison of the episode that I have examined in this paper with another reported by Plutarch helps to substantiate this view. Of course I am referring here to the satire of Roman behavior apropos some obscene literature discovered among the belongings of Roman prisoners of war in Seleucia.⁴⁴ These two ironical and rude accounts fit perfectly the final scene of the *Life* in Artaxata's palace, where Wahrad (Orodēs) and Artawazd (Artavasdes) celebrate the victory over Rome, boasting, and mocking their vanquished enemies.

Notes

1. Josephus, *War of the Jews* I, 8, 179.
2. Karras-Klapproth, *Prosographische*, 185–6.

3. In particular, the discourse insists on the Lie, *druj*, told by Crassus to the Roman authorities, which provoked this illegal military operation: thus, Roman soldiers became victims more than wrongdoers (*Life of Crassus*, 18, 1–2).
4. Justi, *Iranisches*, 338, without clear explanation, except that it begins with the auspicious *wa-*, “good.”
5. See Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, 5/4–5 : it was only a matter of precedence of seating during the audience.
6. “I will sooner have a beard grow in the palm of my hand than he shall get one on his cheek” (*Henry IV*, Part II, Act I, Scene 2). Plutarch was then mostly available in Latin.
7. De Jong, “Purity,” 183–94.
8. Plutarch, *Life of Crassus* 18:3.
9. Dio Cassius XL, 16. Here and elsewhere, he uses Plutarch’s *Life* as a source. Florus, *Epitome* III, 12 mentions Crassus’ reply, but not Vagises’. Perhaps he suspected something insane or barbaric.
10. For instance in Aristophanes’ comedies, in which hairs are trimmed, burnt, plucked out, etc. as a funny allusion in the plot (Cootjans, “Le pubis,” 53–60); Roman vocabulary, though rich on that matter, does not use the expression (see Adams *The Latin*, 208–11).
11. On the Plutarchean idea that intellectual pleasure is superior to carnal pleasure, see Zadorojnyi, “Better than Sex,” 465–73.
12. De Jong, “Regional Variation,” 17–27.
13. Daryaee, “Sight,” 116–17.
14. Female hair seems to be less interesting for the Zoroastrian dogma, with the exception of the eschatological *Ardā Wirāz-nāmag*, chap. 34, 1–7 (in Haug, *The Sacred Books*, p.176): “I also saw the soul of a woman whose whole body the *khrafstars* ever gnawed. And I asked thus: What sin was committed by this body? Srosh the pious, and Adar the angel, said thus: This is the soul of that wicked woman who, in the world, dressed her hair-curls and hair over the fire; and threw hairs from, the head and scurf and hair of the body upon the fire; and introduced fire under the body, and held herself on the fire” (in Haug, *The Sacred Books*, p. 176).
15. Boyce, *History*, 308–9 for secular context, 322 for ritual customs; Choksy, *Purity*, 80–84.
16. *Vendidad* VI, 1/6–7, 3/29 (in Darmesteter, *Sacred Books of the East*).
17. *Ibid.*, VIII, 2/11.
18. *Ibid.*, VIII, 7/38, IX, 1b/30.
19. *Ibid.*, XVII, 1/1.
20. *Šāyest nē šāyest* 2/12–13.
21. *Ibid.*, 2/35.
22. *Ibid.*, 10/8.
23. M. Omidsalar, “Div,” <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/div>; A. V. Williams, “dew,” <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/dew>.
24. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* II, 2/28–30. I will address this issue in a forthcoming study on the *Cyropaedia* as a genuine source of Persian culture: Courtieu, “Digne”; Courtieu, “X/Z.”
25. *Dēnkard* VII, 8/46–7.
26. A. Šāmlū and J. R. Russell, “Al,” <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/al-folkloric-being-that-personifies-puerperal-fever> (updated version).
27. Cantera, “Ethics,” 325.
28. Jamison, *Ravenous Hyenas*, 154.
29. Daryaee, “Sight,” 121.
30. Williams, “Zoroastrianism,” 153: note that it deals with *excessive* practice.
31. Rose, “Gender,” 280; Choksy, *Purity*, 91.
32. Daryee, “Sight,” 106: “Zoroastrianism forbids the wasting of semen under any circumstance.”
33. Mendoza-Forrest 2011, 96–7.
34. Choksy, *Purity*, 91.
35. Lincoln, *Gods*, 33: “Jealous, the Evil Spirit launched an attack from his dark depths, and to assist in the coming battle he fabricated the first demons. Most texts say he used darkness as the raw material for this act of ‘miscreation’, and some hint that this was done via masturbation or self-sodomy.”

36. *Bundabišn* 22.1; Boyce, *History*, 138–9 for the myth; Daryae, “Sight,” 118–19.
37. Gignoux, *Le livre d’Ardā Virāz*, § 70, 2.
38. Choksy, *Purity*, 93; König, *Geschlechtmoral*, 58; Moazami, *Wrestling*, 417, 79.
39. Boyce, *Persian*, 166, for the “Nine Nights” ceremony.
40. Boyce, *History*, 306: “*Pollutio nocturna* is naturally impure, and if it should occur during a priest’s initiation, this is held to show that the candidate is unworthy, and he is not allowed to proceed. The ban is absolute and life-long.”
41. Stausberg, *Religion*, 140.
42. Kiel, *Sexuality*, 33, 131.
43. See most recently, Stepanyan, “Relations,” 121–2; I am currently preparing a comprehensive study on this topic.
44. There, the commanding Parthian general Surena scorns the erotic books found amongst the belongings of a soldier called Rustius (see *Life of Crassus*, 32/4).

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