

Tertullian's Chameleon*

BLAKE LEYERLE

ABSTRACT

Tertullian's treatise De pallio is the briefest and most difficult of the North African's works. Its purpose, ostensibly, is to advocate for a change in clothing from the toga to the pallium. This sartorial shift functions, in turn, as a metaphor for conversion to the philosophical life, which, at the end of the treatise, is revealed to be the Christian life. Towards the centre of the work, Tertullian turns to nature to support his argument, citing the example of five different animals. This essay analyses his description of the chameleon, arguing that it is a riddle: drawing on the natural historians, Tertullian paints a realistic picture of the small lizard, but at the same time, skews the description of these features to depict the philosopher. The purpose of this central sketch is to alert listeners to the nature of the speech as a guessing game, and to point to the complex identity of the speaker.

Keywords: Tertullian; pallium; animal lore; rhetoric; riddle; philosopher

Tertullian's treatise *De pallio* has long been recognised as an oddity. At just six chapters long, it is the briefest of all of the early third-century North African's works. But it is also among his most difficult. What makes the speech so challenging is its style: in the words of Vincent Hunink, '*De Pallio* is one of the strangest texts ever written in Latin'.¹ Its purpose, ostensibly, is to defend its author's change in clothing from the Roman toga to the Greek pallium, and to advocate this shift to others. Far less elaborate than the toga, the pallium was a simple rectangular garment, worn wrapped around the waist and draped over the left shoulder. It was the traditional garb of philosophers.² Tertullian's recommended sartorial shift functions, therefore, as a metaphor for conversion to the philosophical life. At the very end of the treatise, in a surprising twist, the truly philosophical life is revealed to be the Christian life.³

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¹ Hunink 2005: 9. Norden 1898: 615 famously averred that it was '[die] schwierigste Schrift in lateinischer Sprache, die ich gelesen habe'.

² Urbano 2014: 175–94; 2016: 29–31. Baroin and Valette-Cagnac 2007: 517–51 stress the ambiguities inherent in the definition, use and meaning of the garment. Wilhite 2007: 139–45, while conceding that the pallium is often associated with philosophers, argues that Tertullian understood it to be a distinctively African garment and used it 'as a boundary marker of ethnic identity' (at 140). My argument rests on the garment's traditional association with the philosophical way of life.

³ Barnes 1976: 16 notes that Tertullian often postpones his main point until the very end.

Towards the centre of the speech, Tertullian turns to nature to support his argument. This was, of course, a standard rhetorical ploy.⁴ Noting that some animals change ‘not in dress, but in form’, he points to the example of the peacock, the snake, the hyena, the stag and, finally, to that of the chameleon. This last creature seems especially pertinent to his argument, and so it is perhaps unsurprising that he lingers over its description, crafting an account that is longer than all the others combined. But the description is odd. T. D. Barnes characterises it as a set piece inserted to showcase Tertullian’s rhetorical virtuosity, and there are certainly elements designed to attract attention.⁵ It begins, for example, ostentatiously with a riddle. This Tertullian immediately solves, but the description of the creature continues in a notably puzzling vein: not only is the syntax absurdly convoluted and the vocabulary rife with strange neologisms, but few of the features upon which the author dwells have anything to do with change. Mention of the creature’s striking ability to alter its colour is postponed to the end, presumably for emphasis, but then is passed over quickly. The sketch ends with a pun on two well-known proverbs.⁶

I propose that Tertullian’s description of the chameleon operates simultaneously on two levels. Drawing on material collected by the natural historians, it paints a partial yet realistic picture of the small lizard. At the same time, it skews the description of these features to depict the philosopher. The structure of this sketch is thus that of a conundrum or riddle.⁷ As such, it clues the listener (or reader) into the nature of the speech as a kind of guessing game and, to this extent, anticipates the surprise ending of the entire treatise.⁸ To make the case, we must turn to the text.

I THE CHAMELEON IN THE VINEYARD

Although the manuscript tradition, as Barnes notes, ‘is poor and often corrupt’, we can rely on the critical edition established by Marie Turcan and the careful commentary of Vincent Hunink.⁹ Here, I reproduce Turcan’s text, followed by my own translation, for which I am indebted to the work of both scholars.

3.3 Est et quadrupes tardigrada, agrestis, humilis, aspera. Testudinem Pacuianam putas? Non est. Capit et alia bestiola uersiculum, de mediocribus oppido, sed nomen grande. Chamaeleontem qui audieris haud ante gnarus, iam timebis aliquid amplius cum leone. At cum offenderis apud uineam ferme et sub pampino totum, ridebis illico audaciam et Graeci iam nominis. Quippe nec sucus est corpori, quod minutoribus multo licet. Chamaeleon pellicula uiuit. Capitulum statim a dorso; nam deficit ceruix. Itaque durum reflecti, sed circumspectum emissicii ocelli, immo luminis puncta uertiginant. Hebes, fessus, uix a terra suspendit, molitur incessum stupens et promouet; gradum magis demonstrat quam explicat.

⁴ Barnes 1971: 228–32, esp. 230–1.

⁵ Barnes 1976: 3–20.

⁶ As Hunink 2005: 153–4 notes, Tertullian seems to be wittily alluding to several proverbs at once: ‘corio suo ludere’ ‘to risk one’s skin’ (Mart. 3.16.4–5) and ‘de alieno corio ludere’ ‘to play at another’s expense’ (Apol., Met. 7.11.6). Hunink considers that the dominant meaning of the proverb is closer to the version in Martial.

⁷ In this estimate, I differ from Wilhite 2007: 139, who describes the tone of the treatise as ‘one of bitter sarcasm’. For an analysis of ancient riddles, see Luz 2013: 83–99.

⁸ McKechnie 1992: 44–66, esp. 55 argues that *De pallio* was delivered as a speech. This view seems widely accepted (Hunink 2005: 16), but we know nothing about the circumstances of its composition or delivery. The date is also disputed. Barnes 1971: 35–41 dates it firmly to 205 C.E.; Tränkle 1997: 455 supports an even later date range of 205–211 C.E. For a careful review of the discussion, see Hunink 2005: 13–15. The fact that it may have first been delivered as a speech, however, does not negate the possibility that it was subsequently circulated in written form.

⁹ Turcan 2007: 122–6; Hunink 2005: 147–54.

ieiunus scilicet semper et indefectus, oscitans uescitur, follicans ruminat, de uento cibus. Tamen et chamaeleon mutare totus nec aliud ualet. Nam cum illi coloris proprietates una sit, ut quid accessit, inde suffunditur. Hoc soli chamaeleonti datum, quod uulgo dictum est, de corio suo ludere.

There is also the four-footed, slowly stepping, clumsy, lowly, rough creature. Do you think it is the Pacuvian tortoise? No it's not. The verse applies to another little creature, one really quite small, but with a big name. If you hear the name 'chameleon', without prior knowledge, you will fear that it is something bigger than a lion. But if you come across one in a vineyard, almost completely hidden under a vine, you will immediately laugh at the audacity of its name — which is Greek moreover — inasmuch as in its body there is none of the vitality that is found in much smaller creatures. The chameleon is a little living skin. Its little head rises immediately from its back, for it lacks a neck. Turning in the opposite direction is thus difficult; but, in order to look around, its protruding little eyes — or rather pinpricks of light — spin dizzily. Sluggish, tired, scarcely holding itself above the ground, it struggles to walk; dazed, it advances: it more gestures towards a step, than takes one. Always fasting, to be sure, and yet not exhausted; by yawning it feasts; by inflating itself it feeds: its food is from the wind. Nonetheless, even if it can do nothing else, the chameleon can change totally. For although it has a single colour proper to itself, whatever it has approached, it is suffused by it. Only to the chameleon is it given — as the popular saying goes — *to play with its own skin*.

From this description, it is not hard to recognise the lizard-like creature that would have been a familiar denizen of the gardens of North Africa. Before arriving at the one factor that justifies the creature's inclusion, namely its ability to change colour to match its environment, Tertullian identifies its favoured habitat of vineyards. He makes note of its Greek name and stresses its small size.¹⁰ He singles out notable features of its anatomy: its apparent lack of a neck and its protuberant eyes, which appear to swivel in their sockets. He comments on its characteristic traits, lingering over its lethargic gait, which he takes as evidence of the creature's lack of *sucus*, the nutritive fluid that gives vitality to all living things,¹¹ and its tendency to inflate itself, which he understands to be a kind of feeding behaviour. These details, although undeniably interesting, seem quite superfluous. What then is their purpose?

It is quite possible that Tertullian is simply parading his erudition. The treatise is, after all, a showpiece, written in the epideictic style. He aims to convince his listeners with a display of virtuosity and learning: in this case, his command of zoological detail.

The chameleon apparently aroused great interest among the ancient naturalists. According to Pliny the Elder, Democritus devoted an entire book to the creature, carefully describing the shape and properties of each part of its body.¹² And if we compare Tertullian's description with that of the ancient naturalists, we find significant commonalities. Pliny also noted the chameleon's unusual eyes, its meagre flesh and lack of blood, and its astonishing ability to change colour.¹³ He too suggested that it receives its nourishment not from food or drink, but from the air, and opined that for this reason, it holds its mouth open.¹⁴ In addition to these features, Aristotle had earlier

¹⁰ Tertullian tells us in several places that he writes in both Greek and Latin (*De corona militis* 6, *De bapt.* 15, *De uirginibus uelandis* 1).

¹¹ If *sucus* retains its primary meaning of 'sap' or 'vital fluid', as both Hunink (2005: 150) and Thelwall (1885: 8) believe, then Tertullian may be commenting on the dry bagginess of the chameleon's skin. Pliny the Elder notes the creature's lack of blood (*HN* 8.122). The leonine context and the subsequent stress on the sluggishness of the creature suggest, however, that we might prefer to take *sucus* in the metaphorical sense of 'vitality'.

¹² Plin., *HN* 28.112–18.

¹³ Plin., *HN* 8.120–2. All mention its small size. Democritus, however, writes that 'in size, it is like the crocodile' (quoted by Plin., *HN* 28.112).

¹⁴ Ovid mentions these last two features: 'id quoque quod uentis animal nutritur et aura, / protinus adsimulat,

observed the creature's characteristic sluggishness as well as the tortoise-like roughness of its skin.¹⁵

But if Tertullian's aim was simply to impress his audience, why did he omit some of the other striking features that the natural historians include? For example, apart from his acknowledgement that the creature has bulging eyes but no neck, he offers little physiological information. Yet, the general configuration of the chameleon's body was of great interest to Aristotle, who carefully noted its prominent spine, the arrangement of its ribs, its birdlike feet and long, coiled tail. Pliny picked up and adapted these same features; and both men observed the animal's tendency to hibernate during the winter.

From these authors, Tertullian has obviously made a selection of facts. He may want to impress, but the effect he seeks is not that of sheer amplitude. And then there is the central puzzle: why does he delay mentioning the chameleon's most striking trait, especially as this is ostensibly the only characteristic relevant to his argument?¹⁶ And when he does come to the point, why does he express this capacity in such an oddly stilted manner: that it is 'suffused' by any object it has approached? Clearly, something else is going on. To see what this is, we must consider how he frames the passage.

The description begins, as already noted, with a quotation from archaic tragedy, specifically Pacuvius' play *Antiopa*. Although only fragments of Pacuvius' works remain, he was a well known author, even in North Africa.¹⁷ The line reads: 'there is also the four-footed, slowly stepping, clumsy, lowly, rough creature' ('*Quadrupes tardigrada, agrestis, humilis, aspera*'). In its original context, the quotation was a riddle that played upon the double meaning of *testudo*, as not only tortoise but also lyre, since the instrument typically used a tortoise shell as a sound-box.¹⁸ Tertullian flatters his audience, but also teases them, by asking, 'Do you think it is the Pacuvian tortoise?' before immediately answering his own question: 'No it's not.' He then repurposes the riddle, asking in effect, 'What is really quite small, but large in name?' ('*Capit et alia bestiola uersiculum, de mediocribus oppido, sed nomen grande*').¹⁹

Given this build-up, the fact that he immediately provides the solution — 'it is the chameleon' — seems absurdly anticlimactic. But as his description continues, one begins to suspect that the joke is far from over: peculiar adjectives, puzzling verbs and unexpected neologisms abound. The impact of successive oxymoronic statements is particularly striking. A summary of their content reveals their common structure: 'What

tegit quoscumque colores' ('that animal, also, which is nourished by the winds and air, immediately resembles whatever colours it has touched') (*Met.* 15.411).

¹⁵ Arist., *Hist. an.* 2.11 (503b36–8). From this description, it seems likely that Aristotle had dissected a specimen (Beagon 2014: 418–19).

¹⁶ Aelian, to the contrary, focuses on the creature's ability to change colour. 'The chameleon is not disposed to remain of one and same colour for men to see and recognise, but it conceals itself by misleading and deceiving the eye of the beholder. Thus, if you come across one that appears black, it changes its semblance to green, as though it had changed its clothes; then again it assumes a bluish-grey tint and appears different, like an actor who puts on another mask or another garment' (*NA* 2.14, trans. A. F. Scholfield, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA (1958), slightly altered).

¹⁷ The full line, spoken by Amphion, reads: 'quadrupes tardigrada agrestis humilis aspera / capite breui, ceruice anguina, aspectu truci / euiscerata inanima cum animalis sono.' Cicero quotes it (*Div.* 2.133), and it is possible that this is Tertullian's source. Pacuvius was known for coining striking composites such as *tardigrada* (Hunink 2005: 148, citing Manuwald 2003: 120–7).

¹⁸ The riddle had a long afterlife. It was transmitted in a collection of riddles that circulated under the name of Symphosius. *Enigma* 20, *Testudo* reads: 'Tarda, gradu lento, specioso praedita dorso; docta quidem studio, sed saeuo prodata fato, uiua nihil dixi, quae sic modo mortua canto' ('Slow, with sluggish step, furnished with a beautiful back; shrewd indeed through study, but betrayed by fierce fate, living I said nothing, but dead I sing in this way') (CCSL 133A: 641). See Borthwick 1970: 373–87.

¹⁹ The riddle turns on a bilingual pun: although the name chameleon (i.e. 'earthlion') suggests an imposing creature, its body is smaller than a vine leaf. A series of diminutives (*bestiola*, *uersiculum*, *pellicula*, *capitulum*, *ocelli*) underscores the point.

is fearful yet risible; never eating, but always being fed; unable to move an inch, but shifting totally?’²⁰ Instead of solving the riddle, the chameleon extends it.

II THE CHAMELEON JOKE

There is, of course, nothing more likely to kill a joke than dissecting it. But in this case, it cannot be helped, since much of the humour lies in deliberate double meanings.²¹ Consider, for example, Tertullian's description of the creature's eyes: 'Turning in the opposite direction is thus difficult; but, in order to look around, its protruding little eyes — or rather pinpricks of light — spin dizzily.'²²

Part — but only part — of the problem lies in the curious adjective *emissicii*. This is a very rare word, coined by Plautus. It occurs in his *Pot of Gold* (*Aulularia*), when the main character yells at his elderly female slave, characterising her as a 'snooping woman with spying eyes' ('circumspectatrix cum oculis emissiciis').²³ The parallel in Tertullian is hard to miss: not only does *emissicii* modify *ocellis*, but *circumspectum* also picks up *circumspectatrix*.²⁴ But if the comic echo is clear, the humour, as Hunink observes, 'seems less obvious'.²⁵

And how should we understand the brief but surprising statement: 'Chamaeleon pellicula uiuit'? Does it mean that the creature is 'a little skin that lives' or that it 'lives by its little skin'?²⁶ If we assume the former, then the sentence restates the previous point, albeit in striking terms: that lacking any juice, the creature appears to be nothing but animate skin. But if we take it in the latter sense, then it presents a puzzle: in what way does the chameleon live by its skin? If this is indeed the meaning, then its solution may be found a few lines later in the otherwise curious phrase 'follicans ruminat'. The rare word for bellows is clear enough, but what is it doing here? Understood as part of

²⁰ Hunink 2005: 152 characterises some of these odd pairings (for example, *oscitans uescitur*) as 'a minor riddle'. He also suggests that there is a 'graphic' joke worked into the prose. In the long sentence beginning with *Hebes* and ending with *cibus*, we find five cola of increasing length, followed by four cola of decreasing length. 'The structure of the sentence thus seems to support the general image of the animal' (moving from the tail up to the head) (at 151). For a discussion of this kind of humour, see Pappas 2013: 199–224.

²¹ One of Hunink's stated goals in his commentary is to 'clarify possible double meanings of words and clever puns' (Hunink 2005: 25).

²² The verb *uertiginant* attracts attention. Derived from the noun, *uertigo*, it is a word of Tertullian's own creation; it would seem to mean either 'a whirling, spinning movement' or 'dizziness' (as in the English cognate).

²³ *Aul.* 41. The use of both *uertignat* and *emissicii* in a single sentence creates, as Turcan 2007: 125 notes, two neologisms in six words. Pliny's description of the creature's eyes, to the contrary, is perfectly clear: 'it looks around not by the movement of the pupil, but by the turning of the whole eye' ('nec pupillae motu sed totius oculi uersatione circumspicit') (*HN* 8.121). Aristotle's description is also straightforward; he also observes the membrane covering the eye (*Hist. an.* 2.11 503b36–8).

²⁴ The form *circumspectum* is uncertain. The majority of editors favour the dative, *circumspectu*. Hunink 2005: 151 thus translates the sentence, 'This head is hard to move, but when looking around its little eyes protrude, no, they are turning points of light'. On the basis of manuscript evidence as well as Tertullian's style, however, Turcan 2007: 124–5 argues for *circumspectum* as the original reading: '[J]'interprète ce *circumspectum* comme un supin dépendent de *uertigino* assimilé à un verbe de mouvement. Tert. offre quelques exemples de cette construction.' Thus she renders the line: 'Aussi lui est-il difficile de se retourner; mais, pour voir à la ronde, ses petits yeux fureteurs, ou mieux ses points de lumière, tournent en tout sens.' I have followed Turcan's reasoning, because it seems to yield a smoother translation.

²⁵ Hunick 2005: 151. It is possible that the reference is designed to continue the initial riddle. A few lines later, Euclio threatens to accelerate the old woman's 'tortoise pace' ('testudineum istum tibi ego grandibo gradum').

²⁶ Turcan 2007: 123–4 takes *pellicula* as modifying *chamaeleon*: 'Le caméléon, c'est une petite peau qui vit'; Thelwall 1885: 8 also interprets the passage in this way. Hunink 2005: 150, however, insists on the latter reading: '*Pellicula* is surely ablative here.' My argument suggests that the uncertainty is the point.

another deliberately riddling formulation, however, it makes sense, since whatever ‘feeds by inflating itself’, like a pair of leather bellows, may indeed be said to ‘live by its skin’.²⁷

Our puzzlement deepens as we hear about the slow moving lizard. Why is it important that ‘it scarcely holds itself above the ground’ (‘uix a terra suspendit’)?²⁸ Does ‘gradum magis demonstrat quam explicat’ mean that ‘it more gestures towards a step than takes one’, or that ‘it demonstrates rather than explains a step’?²⁹ And then we come to its dietary habits. These are stressed and yet seem not to advance the argument. What is their purpose?

Tertullian, I would suggest, is creating the same effect as Francis Ponge achieved in his humorous poem on the telephone, *L'appareil du téléphone*. This, as Michael Riffaterre demonstrated, achieves its comic effect by generating two texts side by side.³⁰ One is a descriptive discourse that is factual, even technical in nature; it carefully describes the instrument’s portable base, dial, wires, bell, dial tone — and even explains how to make a call.³¹ The other is a figurative discourse that is expressed in images that are flagrantly ornamental and embellishing. These construct, in effect, an ode to the telephone, which recasts the banal equipment in aquatic terms.³² Because the two semantic fields are so extremely remote from each other and do not fit together, the effect is comical.

Riffaterre offers a brilliant analysis of the reader’s experience. One begins in good faith, but then stumbles over a word, ‘a rather rare, hence highly visible, vaguely comical, clearly colloquial term’. ‘That’s odd’, one thinks, but carries on, only to encounter another oddity, and then another. The effect of ‘gratuitous fancifulness’ mounts and forces itself upon the reader’s attention.³³ Over-determined, it becomes impossible to ignore: the poem’s dominant code is crustacean. There is a lobster hidden in the ‘phone.

In a similar fashion, I would suggest, Tertullian has hidden a philosopher inside the chameleon. The tipping point for most listeners comes at the curious turn of phrase, ‘gradum magis demonstrat quam explicat’. For if it is impossible to imagine a small lizard ‘explaining a step’, the wording becomes clear when understood as an allusion to Diogenes the Cynic, who once refuted the Eleatic assertion that there was no such thing as motion, by simply getting up and walking away.³⁴

²⁷ The final proverb ‘de corio suo ludere’ may also be part of the wordplay. The chameleon can be said ‘to live by its skin’, because only to it is it given ‘to play with its own hide’. The logic depends upon an unspoken assumption that the ability to change colour is protective. The fact that the meaning of the proverb is unstable, however, generates another possible interpretation. If the saying is taken in the sense in which we find it in Martial, it creates another paradoxical formulation: the chameleon can be said ‘to live by its skin’, because only to it is it given ‘to risk its own hide’. The implicit assumption here is that because the colour change is inadvertent, it might endanger the creature.

²⁸ Aristotle, to the contrary, stresses that the chameleon ‘stands higher off the ground than lizards’ (*Hist. an.* 2.11 [503a21]).

²⁹ The verb *explicat* occurred earlier in connection with the snake, where it bore the literal sense of ‘uncoiling’ (3.2.2). The fact that it must mean something different here encourages the reader to entertain other meanings.

³⁰ Riffaterre 1974: 278–93; 1978: 125–38, citing Ponge 1961: 62–3.

³¹ This discourse is ‘derived from *appareil* as a metonym for *téléphone*, with the meaning it has in the phrase *appareil de téléphone*’ (i.e. a set or mechanical gadget). Mimetic in character, the discourse invites literal interpretation. It has, as Riffaterre 1978: 128 notes, ‘a moralizing voice and leans towards philosophical attitudes’.

³² This second discourse is generated by the aberrant syntax of the expression *appareil du téléphone*. The presence of the contracted form of the definite article *du* (instead of the simple preposition *de* used in adjectival constructions) leads the reader to reassess the meaning of the word *appareil* and to recover its archaic use as a synonym of *apparat*, *pompe* or *fête*. *Appareil du téléphone* (i.e. ‘grandiose display of the telephone’) conjures up a mock epic, or as Riffaterre suggests, a *blason*, written in praise or dispraise of an object that has little significance in itself (Riffaterre 1974: 282–3, 286–7; 1978: 128–9). The title is a pun.

³³ Riffaterre 1974: 285. ‘The immediate effect is that of gratuitous fancifulness’ (at 281). Gratuitousness ‘becomes the index of consistency elsewhere’; it ‘is in fact part of the overdetermination system’ (at 286).

³⁴ Diog. Laert. 6.2.39, as noted by Turcan 2007: 125. Tertullian’s use of stories about ancient philosophers and quotations of their sayings proves, according to Barnes, the ready availability of compendia (Barnes 1971: 195–9, at 196).

Once we get the joke, other puzzling phrases fall into place. The chameleon's peculiar feeding habits, for example, suddenly make a new kind of sense. For if some attention to diet might be expected, given the preoccupations of the natural historians, Tertullian's stress on the creature's habitual non-eating seems oddly insistent: 'Ieiunus scilicet semper et indefectus, oscitans uescitur, follicans ruminat, de uento cibus.' First, there is the particle *scilicet*. Although it would make sense to take this in its concessive sense ('always fasting, to be sure, but not exhausted'), there is the possibility that it should be read ironically ('Always fasting — if you please! — yet not exhausted'); the fact that it is followed by paradoxical assertions, couched in unusual language, fosters this inclination.³⁵ Then there is the double repetition of the point ('by yawning it feasts; by inflating itself it feeds'); and finally the abrupt syntactical shift in the final clause ('its food is from the wind'), which, as Hunink notes, 'creates a surprise effect'.³⁶ The reason for this emphasis, however, becomes clear when we consider another characteristic trait attributed to Diogenes. An early poem of Cercidas of Megalopolis styles him as αἰθεριβόσκας.³⁷ The term is striking and equivocal. It might refer to Diogenes' disdain for social conventions and thus to his habit of satisfying bodily needs in as natural and public a way as possible. Taking it in this sense, we might translate it, with López Cruces, as 'feeding in the open air', or even 'living in the open air'.³⁸ Certainly stories in which the Cynic scandalised onlookers by eating in public circulated widely in antiquity. But the most obvious translation of the epithet is that he 'fed on air'.³⁹ Understood in this sense, it would neatly account for Tertullian's emphasis. And it might also explain the odd line, 'uix a terra suspendit'. Perhaps this is neither a reference to the creature's apparent torpor (that 'it scarcely holds itself above the ground'), nor an extension on the bilingual pun on its Greek name ('earthlion'), but rather a nod towards the philosopher's presumed relationship to terrestrial reality (that 'he is scarcely dependent upon the earth').⁴⁰

Of all philosophers, it is Diogenes who is most identified with the cloak. His decision to live as simply as possible led him to reject all other clothing — and indeed covering — as superfluous. Day or night, he could be found wrapped in the same ragged cloak.⁴¹ As the distinctive mark of his way of life, it was adopted by his followers and frequently mocked by comedians.⁴² An echo of this association may inform Tertullian's enigmatic line that 'the chameleon is a little living skin' ('Camaeleon pellicula uiuit'). *Pellicula* carries a range of meanings, but they are all joined by the idea of a detachable outer covering: the rind of a fruit or the hide of an animal. It can carry a sense of disguise or, indeed, of deception.⁴³ Tertullian might well be poking fun at the philosopher, as someone wholly identified with his outer garment.

These parallels are suggestive and may have informed Tertullian's sketch. In the section of the speech that follows, he mentions Diogenes by name, and references to this colourful

³⁵ OLD s.v. 2, 4. Hunink 2005: 152 characterises *oscitans uescitur* as 'a minor riddle'. He notes, 'There seems to be no example before Tertullian of *oscitare* used for animals'. *Follicare* is an uncommon verb, and its intransitive use, even rarer.

³⁶ Hunink 2005: 152.

³⁷ The poem reads: οὐ μὲν ὁ πάρος γὰρ Σινωπεὺς / τήνος ὁ βακτροφόρος, / διπλείματος, αἰθεριβόσκας, ἀλλ' ἀνέβα / χεῖλος ποτ' ὀδόντας ἐρείσας / καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα συνδακόν· / Ζωνὸς γόνος ἧς γὰρ ἀλαθέως / οὐράνιος τε κύων (Diog. Laert. 6.76–7). Athenaeus preserves a variant attributed to the comic playwright Eubulus (*Deipn.* 3.113).

³⁸ López Cruces 2018: 91–6; see also Hicks 1931: 79.

³⁹ Mensch 2018: 295.

⁴⁰ cf. Manlius 3.58: '[Natura] fata quoque et uitas hominum suspendit ab astris.' Hunink 2005: 152 and Turcan 2007: 125 both suggest, on the basis of parallels within Tertullian's work, that the verb *suspendit* must be read reflexively.

⁴¹ Diog. Laert. 6.6, 13, 22, 77. Tertullian alludes specifically to this legend (*Pall.* 5.3).

⁴² Diog. Laert. 6.87, 93, 105.

⁴³ See, for example, Pers., *Sat.* 5.116; Hor., *Sat.* 2.5.3.

philosopher appear in his other writings.⁴⁴ But the joke does not depend upon our recognising them. More important than any particular parallel is the general sense that these are the sorts of things that philosophers do. They live a life of retirement in which they spend their time prying into everything. They have an impressive name and are quite puffed up, but are unimpressive physical specimens, since they nourish themselves frugally on readily available kinds of foods and do not exercise vigorously.

When we look elsewhere in Tertullian's work, we find evidence in support of these associations. The creature's lethargic slowness, which Tertullian emphasises so strongly ('Hebes, fessus, ... stupens'), finds an echo in his description of philosophers. All philosophers, he claims, glory in quietness. To repose 'they give the name of pleasure; in it they have their bliss; in it they find entertainment'.⁴⁵ Epicurus, in particular, is repeatedly characterised by lethargy (*stupor*).⁴⁶ And where else might one encounter a proponent of the Garden school than half-hidden under some foliage?⁴⁷ Mocking the claim of the pre-Socratic philosopher, Empedocles, that he remembered his previous incarnations as a bush and a fish, Tertullian asks: 'Why not rather a melon, seeing that he was such a fool; or a chameleon, given how puffed up he was?'⁴⁸ For this, he summarises, is the way of philosophy, it takes common truths 'and inflates them in order to glorify its own art'.⁴⁹ Similar sentiments recur in this same treatise: he mocks the 'swollen' nature of philosophers and their habit of wearing 'even more inflated clothing' ('uestis inflator'), and imagines that if the pallium could speak, it would make an appeal precisely on the basis that 'a much better life can be enjoyed in a secluded place than in full view'.⁵⁰

Once we get the joke, we can see why Tertullian draws attention to the creature's grandiose name — which is Greek, moreover — he means not just *chamaeleon*, but also *philosophus*. The surprise of finding a philosopher disguised as a chameleon is certainly funny, and seems to endow his earlier promise that 'when you stumble upon it ... you will immediately laugh' ('At cum offenderis ... ridebis illico') with new meaning. But what is the purpose of this humour? In order to appreciate its function, we must consider its context.

III THE POINT OF RIDDLES

The sequence of animals, in which the chameleon figures, brings to conclusion a lengthy opening argument that the world is characterised by change.⁵¹ To support this claim, Tertullian presents proof from various domains. He canvasses philosophical and

⁴⁴ *Pall.* 4.7. In the next section, Tertullian mentions Crates, Diogenes' most famous disciple, who is credited with doubling the cloak (5.3), and discusses Heracles at length, whom Diogenes adopted as a model. For other references to Diogenes in Tertullian's works, see *Ad nat.* 1.10, 2.2; *Apol.* 14, 39, 46, 50; *Adu. Marc.* 1.1. Barnes 1971: 229 goes so far as to suggest that Tertullian presents himself throughout the speech 'in the guise of a Cynic'.

⁴⁵ *De spect.* 28.

⁴⁶ *Pall.* 5.4. *Epicuri stupor* (*De anim.* 4.2, 43.2, 50.2). Another passage in the *De anima*, deriding the philosophical theory of *metensomatosis*, describes the soul in terms that recall the chameleon (32.6): it 'clings to the earth and is fearless neither of height nor of depth, and exhausted even by climbing stairs' ('terris inhaerebat, nullius sublimitatis, nullius profunditatis intrepida, ascensu etiam scalarum fatigabilis ...').

⁴⁷ For references to Epicurus' garden, see Cic., *Fin.* 5.1.3; Diog. Laert. 10.10–11.

⁴⁸ 'Cur non magis et pepo, tam insulsus, et chamaeleon, tam inflatus?' (*De anim.* 32.3 referring to Fr. 117 (DK 31B) = Diog. Laert. 8.77: ἦδη γὰρ ποτ' ἐγὼ γενόμεν κοῦρός τε κόρη τε / θάμνος τ' οἰωνός τε καὶ ἔξαλος ἔμπυρος ἰχθύς. Empedocles is first caricatured and then mentioned by name in *Pall.* 4.7.

⁴⁹ 'Hunc nacta philosophia ad gloriam propriae artis inflavit prae studio' (*De anim.* 2.2).

⁵⁰ *Pall.* 4.6; 'Vita meliore magis in secessu fruere quam in promptu' (5.4). Such retirement, he acknowledges, would earn the reproach of indolence (*ignava*).

⁵¹ The theme of the universality of change leads Brennan 2008: 257–70 to conclude that Tertullian had a serious

historical theory and offers scientific evidence. After discussing geological and seasonal changes, as well as the shifts brought about by war and migration, he cites the examples of the peacock, snake, hyena, stag and chameleon as proof that 'creatures also change their appearance if not their clothing' ('mutant et bestiae pro ueste formam'). The rationale for this extended overview is given in the next section, which begins: 'Much had to be said in order to arrive well prepared at the human being' ('Multa dicendum fuit ut ad hominem praestructim perueniretur').

The statement seems clear, both in sense and in syntax, but it raises a question. In what way does this information prepare listeners for what follows? True, the topic of change continues, as Tertullian traces the shifts in clothing from the first human, born 'certainly naked and unclothed' ('nudus certe et inuestis'), to the first rude coverings of leaves and skins, through the increasingly sophisticated technologies of cloth production (yielding first wool, then linen, marine fabric and silk), to the luxurious refinements introduced by tailoring and decorative adornment. Apart from agreement with the general premise that 'things change', however, this survey does not rely on the preceding discussion. The sequence of animal examples, in particular, seems unnecessary and the level of detail found in the description of the chameleon completely otiose. Again, we could decide that the erudition is marshalled simply for the purpose of display. But as an explanation, this seems unsatisfactory, insofar as it cannot account for the obvious selectivity guiding Tertullian's choice and development of these examples. To understand their contribution — how they prepare the audience for what follows — we must draw back and consider the sequence as a whole.

The peacock, snake, hyena, stag and chameleon are arranged in chiasmic order to illustrate different kinds of change: the first and last involve alteration in colour, the second and fourth changes in age, and the central third, a switch in sex. The length of the descriptions also varies considerably. A single sentence suffices for the hyena and stag, whereas the peacock and snake each receive a short paragraph; the description of the chameleon is longer than all the others combined. The rhetorical artfulness of these sketches has often been noted, but far less appreciated is their deliberately paradoxical quality. It would be rewarding to examine each of these in turn,⁵² but for reasons of space, we will consider only the peacock, since it is paired with the chameleon.

Peacocks were admired by the Romans for their beauty and apparently also for their taste.⁵³ Pliny's and Aelian's accounts of the bird include exotic lore, but Tertullian focuses entirely on its appearance.

3.1 Mutant et bestiae pro ueste formam; quamquam et pauo pluma uestis, et quidem de cataclistis, immo omni conchylio pressior qua colla florent, et omni patagio inauratior qua terga fulgent, et omni syrmate solutior qua caudae iacent, multicolor et discolor et uersicolor, nunquam ipsa, semper alia, etsi semper ipsa quando alia, totiens denique mutanda, quotiens mouenda.

Creatures also change their appearance instead of their clothing — although for the peacock, feathers serve as clothing, and indeed of the most precious kind, one that assuredly blooms more darkly about its neck than any purple-dyed cloth, and gleams more gilded along its back than any decorative border, and falls more gracefully from its tail than any theatrical train: many-coloured, parti-coloured and changing colour; never itself, always other, yet always itself when other; in short, it must change as often as it is moved.

purpose in writing this treatise: he was 'arguing that his audience *habitu uertere* in two senses, namely a change of fashion and a (significant) change of affect' (at 260).

⁵² See Leyerle, *forthcoming*.

⁵³ Ael., *NA* 5.21 notes the rarity of peacocks, their exhibition for a fee and their use as food. Tertullian also alludes to the eating of peacocks in this same work (*Pall.* 5.6); see also Plin., *HN* 10.45. For the early Christian interest in peacocks, see Jensen 2000: 17, 158–9.

Elegantly compressed, the description — like that of the chameleon — includes unusual words: both Greek terms (*cataclistic*, *conchylio*, *patagio*, *syrmate*) as well as rare Latin forms (*pauo*,⁵⁴ *inaurior*, *multicolor*). Such technical virtuosity was typical of the Second Sophistic and strongly recalls Apuleius' *Florida*, which includes descriptions of an eagle and a parrot.⁵⁵ But unlike the work of his older contemporary, Tertullian's description is presented as a paradox.

Its structure, as Hunink observes, is dominated by the element of three: three closely parallel clauses compare the feathers of three parts of the bird (its neck, back and tail) to components of luxurious dress (purple-dyed cloth, decorative borders and theatrical train). These are followed by a string of three adjectives referring to colour. But it is the third part of the description that commands our attention. Its syntax, unlike that of the preceding clauses, is simple ('nunquam ipsa, semper alia, etsi semper ipsa quando alia'), but its formulation notably paradoxical. With only the smallest of changes, it could be reformulated as a riddle: 'what is never itself, but always other, yet always itself when other?'

Unlike modern riddles, of course, it begins with a straightforward identification of the answer. This admission might seem to obviate the comparison, were we not to remember that Latin literature enjoyed precisely these kinds of witty puzzles. The fact that Martial's epigrams begin by announcing the object or animal in no way detracts from an enjoyment of the concise and often paradoxical formulation that follows. As a case in point, consider his *xenia* on dormice:

Glires

Tota mihi dormitur hiems et pinguior illo
tempore sum quo me nil nisi somnus alit.

Dormice

The whole winter is slept through by me and I am fatter in that
season in which nothing except sleep nourishes me.⁵⁶

Without the title, nothing would distinguish it from a riddle; and even with it, the source of its pleasure, which derives from the process of fitting an obscure formulation to a quotidian reality, is the same. Another epigram, this time on a kind of cloth, poses its puzzle more directly:

Lanae Amethystinae

Ebria Sidoniae cum sim de sanguine conchae,
non uideo quare sobria lana uocer.

Amethyst-dyed wool

Since I am drunk with the blood of Sidon's shellfish
I do not see why I am called sober wool.⁵⁷

The humour of the conundrum lies in a bilingual pun: 'amethyst', in the context of textile production, indicates a violet colour derived from molluscs; but etymologically, the word

⁵⁴ Not the nominative of the standard *pauo*, *-nis*, but an unusual dative form of *pauus* (Hunink 2005: 140).

⁵⁵ Apul., *Flor.* 2, 12. Although it cannot be proved that Tertullian had heard Apuleius speak or had read any of his surviving works, Barnes opines that he must have known him — at least by reputation. Both men, he points out, lived in the same city within the space of a generation and both displayed extreme rhetorical virtuosity (Barnes 1976: 3–20, esp. 8–13; 1971: 228–32). Hunink concurs: 'Anyone who had seriously studied the *Florida* and then embarks on reading *Pall.* can hardly be in doubt here; these texts belong to the same class of rhetoric' (Hunink 2005: 16–19 at 17, 139–42); the contention goes back to Norden 1898: 615. In his short essay, Edwards 2001: 47–54 notes intriguing parallels with Apul., *Met.*

⁵⁶ Mart., *Epig.* 13.59.

⁵⁷ Mart., *Epig.* 14.154.

stems from the Greek for 'unintoxicated'.⁵⁸ Here, far from detracting from the humour, the title is itself part of the riddle.⁵⁹

The fact, then, that we know from the outset that Tertullian's description pertains to the peacock does not wholly eliminate the puzzle; indeed, in some ways, it enhances it. For even if we grant that the pigmentation of the peacock's plumage is startlingly intense, it is still unclear in what way it is 'never itself, always other, yet always itself when other'. It is possible that he is referring to the iridescence of its feathers, the fact that they shimmer and shift in colour depending on the light. Other Latin writers certainly noted the phenomenon and used images of jewels or stars to express it.⁶⁰ But Tertullian's metaphors are drawn from the world of textiles and concentrate on the luxurious rather than the luminous nature of the plumage: its deep purple hue, gilded border and sumptuous train. This last element attracts attention with its use of a Greek technical term, *syrmate*, which designates the long, trailing costume traditionally worn by tragic actors. The overtly theatrical implication of the word colours our sense of the preceding elements: all three descriptors could belong to the stage.⁶¹

By the time of Tertullian, classical tragedy had been largely supplanted by the pantomime, in which a single actor played all the roles. His costume consisted of a long robe that reached at least to his ankles, but might trail on the ground.⁶² Usually made of silk and brightly coloured, it often had a decorative border or golden fringe.⁶³ On top of this outfit, he added a pallium. This last element seems, of course, particularly relevant to Tertullian's argument, but he does not mention it.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the suspicion that the description is operating on two levels increases with the following line: 'never itself, always other, yet always itself when other'. For this was the essence of the pantomime's artistry. By altering his bodily gestures and manipulating his costume, the dancer could shift his appearance completely: he was defined by constant change.⁶⁵ Tertullian, it would seem, is once again teasing his listeners. In the same manner that he concealed a philosopher inside the chameleon, he has hidden an actor within a bird.⁶⁶

The other animal descriptions, although far less elaborated, are similarly structured around a central paradox. Each poses a conundrum that the audience must figure out for themselves. It is this form, I suggest, rather than any content, that is crucial to Tertullian's authorial purpose. Once his listeners have grasped the structure, they are 'well-prepared' (*praestructim*) for what follows. They can enter into the game. They will expect puzzling twists and anticipate hidden meanings. In the very next section of the speech, Tertullian tests their ability.

3.4 Hunc quoquo primordio accipitis, nudus certe et inuestis figulo suo constitit. Post demum, sapientiam, haud dum licitum praereptam, potitur. Ibidem quod in nouo corpore indebitum

⁵⁸ Plin., *HN* 37.121–4.

⁵⁹ In both epigrams, the enjoyment of the joke derives as much from an appreciation of the natural world as from linguistic facility. See the illuminating comments of Blake 2011: 353–77.

⁶⁰ Mart., *Epig.* 13.70; Ov., *Met.* 15.385; Plin., *HN* 10.43; cf. Lucian on the fly (*Musc. laud.* 1).

⁶¹ cf. Apul., *Apol.* 13.7. The much later *Historia Augusta* reproaches Junius Messalla for giving his inheritance to actors, as 'if a tragic actor could use his grandmother's pallium as a gilded and purple costume' ('si auiae pallio aurato atque purpureo pro syrmate tragoedus uteretur') (SHA *Carus, Carinus, Numerian* 20).

⁶² Wyles 2008: 63–5, quoting Cl. Alex., *Paed.* 2.11.

⁶³ Webb 2008: 61–6. At 64–6 Wyles cites additional evidence for fringes and gilded borders.

⁶⁴ Fronto, *De orationibus* 4 describes actors using the pallium to represent, among other things, a swan's tail ('ut histriones, quom palliolatim saltant, caudam cycni ... eodem pallio demonstrant') (ed. van den Hout 1988: 154; discussed by Wyles 2008: 65–6, 75–7).

⁶⁵ Lucian, *Salt.* 67; *Lib., Or.* 64.117; Wyles 2008: 68–77. Wyles assumes that Tertullian refers to a pantomime dancer in *De spect.* 10.

⁶⁶ The notion that a peacock could conceal a person occurs elsewhere in Tertullian's writings. He twice mocks the idea, found in Ennius, that Homer remembered having been a peacock (*De resurrectione carnis* 1, *De anim.* 33.8; Enn., *Ann.* ix (ed. Skutsch 1985: 71).

adhuc pudori erat protegere festinans, ficulneis foliis interim circumdat. Dehinc, cum de originis loco exterminat, quippe deliquerat, pellitus orbi ut metallo datur.

Whatever you consider to be his [i.e. the human being's] origin, he was certainly created naked and unclothed by the one who moulded him. Only afterwards, did he snatch wisdom prematurely, while it was not yet licit. At that very instant, hurrying to protect in his new body that which was not yet pledged to shame, he put fig leaves around it for the time being. Later, when he was expelled from his place of origin, because he had committed an offence, he was handed over to the world as if to a prison, clad in skin.

As Hunink notes, the description is cast in deliberately general terms. The names Adam and Eve do not appear, and 'some words (*quoquo primodio; certe; figulo*) and elements (illicit wisdom) create the impression that it is not one particular story that is referred to, but elements common to various ancient traditions'.⁶⁷ Even the woman's role in the untimely seizure of wisdom, so often laboured by Tertullian, goes unmentioned; the description could refer to Prometheus' theft. Nor is the notion of a primordial offence or of animal skin clothing exclusively biblical. And yet there is an unmistakable clue: there are no comparable stories about the first human being created 'naked and unclothed'. The connection to Genesis is deliberately obscured, but still apparent to those prepared to puzzle out the clues. Similar hints of the author's Christian affiliation punctuate the speech. To those attentive to the underlying structure, the final revelation of a hidden figure comes less as a surprise, than as a delightful confirmation of a sustained joke.

In addition to illuminating the nature of the work, the riddling format clarifies the identity of the speaker. He is someone who poses conundrums. This activity may strike us as characteristic of rhetoricians, and certainly the parallels with Apuleius and Martial bespeak literary influence. But in contemporary literary portraits, the behaviour is also typical of philosophers. They are often shown challenging their listeners by speaking obscurely and imposing upon them puzzles and other conundrums.⁶⁸ In these situations, as Anna Potamiti notes, the 'norms of interrogation are reversed'. The person posing questions is not actually seeking information. He already knows the answer.⁶⁹ Instead of exposing his ignorance, the riddle tests his listeners' cognitive ability. It assesses their mental flexibility, their ability to move between alien codes and discover similarities in disparate terms of comparison.⁷⁰ By speaking in paradoxes and riddles, Tertullian presents himself not only as an accomplished rhetorician, but also as a philosopher, that is as a person worthily clad in the pallium. In retrospect, much of the address seems designed to impress this same point upon the audience: not only can the speaker discourse learnedly on the origin of things, but he expounds the virtue of living according to nature, attacks the proponents of other philosophical schools and censures immorality.

The speech ends, as already noted, with a further unexpected twist: that the pallium now clothes a Christian. Like the chameleon, Tertullian shows that he too can 'play with his own skin' ('de corio suo ludere'). This revelation of a hidden identity leaves listeners with the task of bridging a logical gap; they must figure out how it applies to what they have previously heard. Looking back, there have been hints along the way. But it is the words of the personified pallium that provide perhaps the most important clue. For with

⁶⁷ Hunink 2005: 154–5. Although *figulus* would become widely used for the Christian God, Hunink argues that it would not yet have carried this association.

⁶⁸ Schlapbach 2010: 250–77.

⁶⁹ Potamiti 2015: 133–53, at 143.

⁷⁰ It is on this basis that Branham 1993: 33–48, esp. 35–7, argues for the similarity between humour and the philosophical enterprise.

philosophers, Christians shared the conviction that true adherence was marked less by any explication of belief than by a distinctive manner of life.⁷¹ And this is the gist of the pallium's final speech: 'Truly, even if eloquence were to fall silent ... the clothing itself would cry out. A philosopher, in short, is heard when he is seen. At my appearance, I make vices blush.'⁷² The verb *suffundo* recalls the description of the chameleon's most startling trait, namely, its ability to change colour: that it is 'blushed' by its surroundings. The parallel is teasing. Tertullian, it would seem, is gesturing towards the solution to the puzzle he himself raised: 'How is the chameleon like the pallium?' Both are living skins; but one is blushed by that which it encounters, while the other makes those who encounter it blush.⁷³

IV CONCLUSIONS

What then can we conclude from this study of Tertullian's chameleon? What do we gain by seeing in this little description a joke within a riddle?

First, the verbal playfulness illuminates the nature of the speech as a whole. If the original audience deciphered it as we have, they would (I suggest) have found the key that Tertullian tucked into its centre. For as every commentator has noted, the speech ends with a surprising revelation: the argument that seemed to be going in one direction, suddenly folds in upon itself. The chameleon joke suggests that this same structure can be found on the micro-level. Paradox and word play recur throughout the speech but are especially prominent in the sequence of animal sketches. Of these, the chameleon is by far the most developed: introduced with a riddle and ending with an outrageous pun, the entire description is filled with oxymoronic puzzles and surprising turns of phrase. Indeed, Tertullian even promises his audience that, 'when you stumble upon it ... you will immediately laugh' ('At cum offenderis ... ridebis illico'). Along with the peacock, to which it is linked by its chiasmic pairing as well as by its focus on dress, the chameleon raises the humorous possibility of concealed identity and thus prepares the audience for what follows. They are primed to expect verbal play and the revelation of a hidden figure.

Second, the speaker's willingness to engage in riddling discourse also reveals something about Tertullian. We learn that he was prepared to be funny — and this is not an insignificant conclusion. Early Christian writers are not commonly thought to be a humorous bunch; they object often and loudly to all kinds of comic displays and typically express a preference for tears over laughter. 'Caustic', 'acerbic' and 'sarcastic' are the types of adjectives usually applied to Tertullian's works, but these qualities are not incompatible with wit. Indeed, they are often its necessary accompaniment — as we know well from political humour of our own day. It is undoubtedly a hard thing to spot humour in a written text (let alone in an ancient one) but we will never see it, if we are not open to its potential presence.⁷⁴ Riffaterre's penetrating analysis suggests one fruitful method for uncovering the mechanism of a literary joke. Like Francis Ponge, who styled himself an archaeologist of language, Tertullian revelled in the possibilities afforded by

⁷¹ Hadot 1995.

⁷² 'Verum, et si eloquium quiescat ... ipse habitus sonat. Sic denique auditur philosophus dum uidetur. De occurso meo uitia suffundo' (*Pall.* 6.1). The point is important enough to demand repeating: 'Grande pallii beneficium est, sub cuius recogitatu improbi mores uel erubescunt' ('The great benefit of the pallium is this: at the thought of it, evil habits blush at least').

⁷³ The verb *suffunditur*, which is typically used of liquids, seems odd for an animal (especially for one lacking moisture), but suitable for textiles. Urbano 2014: 178 notes that the pallium, although often left in its natural state, might be dyed a wide variety of colours.

⁷⁴ Beard 2014: 49–59.

linguistic play. He delighted in using rare and antiquarian terms, discordant juxtaposition and aberrant syntax to construct multiple levels of association. From these, he created a web of over-determination, which functions as an implicit challenge to listeners: they must figure it out. Parallels with Martial's witty epigrams attest to the contemporary popularity of this kind of verbal play. A fondness for riddles and puns, however, should not lead us to underestimate Tertullian's serious aim. By speaking in paradoxes, he was not simply amusing his audience. He was laying claim to the philosopher's mantle, even as he shifted its meaning to cover the Christian.⁷⁵ At the very centre of this riddle lies Tertullian's own complex identity.

University of Notre Dame
Leyerle.1@nd.edu

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⁷⁵ The relationship between Christianity and philosophy was of intense and on-going interest to Tertullian (*De anim.* 2; Barnes 1971: 205–10, 229–31).

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