

The Traffic in Glands

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ABSTRACT

The story that beavers self-castrate when cornered by hunters appears in a range of Roman sources, both poetry and prose, from the end of the Republic onward. This myth is a product of the rôle that ‘beaver testicles’ played in Roman luxury trade and medicine. At the same time, it serves as a literary figure for the fraught relations between Rome and the provinces from which these, and other, luxury goods were imported.

Keywords: beavers; Roman trade; Pliny; Apuleius; luxury goods; merchants

I suspect that I share with many classicists the experience of having puzzled over Book 1, section 9 of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, which reads, in part: ‘with a word, she changed her lover into a wild beaver, because that creature, when it fears to be captured by hunters, relieves itself of its genitals by cutting.’ Of course it is true that modern beavers do no such thing; moreover, it is difficult for anyone who has ever seen a beaver to imagine how it would perform such an operation. One wonders, quite simply, how such an implausible bit of zoological lore could ever have been believed.¹ But believed it was, if our surviving sources are any indication. The tale of the beaver’s self-castration appears with some frequency, not only in Roman poetry and fiction, but in texts which we conventionally regard as proto-scientific. For instance, Pliny’s *Natural History*:

The beavers of Pontus cut off these same parts [their testicles] when danger presses, knowing that this is why they are hunted.

The legend had, too, a remarkably long life. A doctor by the name of Sextius had already come out against it in Pliny’s time, but Pliny seems not to have taken his arguments very seriously. No more did later authors, if indeed they were familiar with Sextius’ arguments at all. To the contrary, Aelian’s account is a good deal more naive:

Surely, then, [the beaver] understands the reason why hunters attack it eagerly and with zeal, and, by cutting and biting, it severs its own testicles, and casts these aside like a wise man falling among pirates who abandons all that he carries with him for the sake of his own safety.

¹ *Met.* 1.9: ‘Amatorem suum, quod in aliam temerasset, unico verbo mutavit in feram castorem, quod ea bestia captivitatis metuens ab insequentibus se praecisione genitalium liberat.’ The passage in which these lines appear is a treasury of Roman animal myths, each meriting an essay of its own. For issues of basic interpretation, see A. Scobie, *Apuleius Metamorphoses (Asinus Aureus): A Commentary* (1975), *ad loc.* Indirect evidence of the interest that this passage has held for Classics: in the last century, *Met.* 1.9 attracted a number of philological notes and emendations out of all proportion to its size. Two of the best, which we will have occasion to cite again, are F. Leo, ‘Coniectanea’, *Hermes* 40, no. 4 (1905), 605–13; and N. Holmes, ‘Two notes on Apuleius’, *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 144, no. 3/4. Neue Folge (2001), 432–4.

The lexicographers Hesychius and Isidore both retail the legend *sub verbo* ‘castor’. A more detailed version of Pliny’s refutation appears in Thomas Browne’s sixteenth-century *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, but Browne’s arguments likewise seem to have had little effect. The author of the article on beavers in the 1751 edition of *L’Encyclopédie*, armed with fresh specimens and accurate drawings courtesy of trappers operating in French Canada, was the one who finally laid the legend of the beaver’s self-castration to rest.²

It is not my present purpose to examine this whole slanderous history. Instead, I shall suggest answers to a pair of narrower and, to my mind, related questions. First: where did the Roman legend of the self-castrating beaver come from? And second: what led the Romans to accept it, seemingly against all evidence of fact? Both lines of inquiry will point us, I think, towards some peculiar characteristics of the Roman trade in luxury goods — and the bizarre mythologies to which this trade sometimes gave birth. A story that erred so far from the truth could nonetheless, I will argue, give an accurate representation of economic and political realities.

Which realities? At the very least, the tangled web of trade and exchange by which beaver testicles travelled from the margins of Rome’s empire to its centre. The traffic in glands, as I will call it, is well-attested for the Greek and Roman worlds alike. Our earliest evidence — which is, however, of uncertain date — comes from a pair of works in the Hippocratic Corpus, *De Mulieribus Sterilibus* and *De Superfetatione*, which recommend the use of ‘kastoros orchin’ in the treatment of a range of female reproductive disorders. Pliny will repeat the Hippocratic prescriptions, further recommending the employment of beaver testicles against — to cite only two examples from a very long list of afflictions — nervous disorders and scorpion stings. Pliny also informs us, very helpfully, that the best in this line of commodity can be had from the regions of Pontus and Galatia, Africa running a close second.³

We find Pliny’s connoisseurship confirmed in some unexpected places. Virgil, in the first *Georgic*, speaks of ‘Pontus ... which sends its smelly castoreum’; castoreum, of course, is the processed oil of the beaver testicle. The much-afflicted speaker of the *Nux* likewise addresses an apostrophe to the ‘pontice castor’, with whose plight he sympathizes. Roman poets associate Pontus with beaver testicles quite as closely as Arabia with frankincense, or Falernium with fine wine.⁴

² Pliny, *NH* 8.47.109: ‘Easdem partes sibi ipsi Pontici amputant fibri periculo urgente, ob hoc se peti gnari’, with 32.13.26: ‘spectabili naturae potentia, in iis quoque, quibus et in terris victus est, sicut fibris, quos castoras vocant et castorea testes eorum.’ (‘Nature’s power is remarkable in those also whose nourishment is on land, like beavers, which they call *castors* and whose testicles they call *castorea*.’) On Sextius Niger, see M. Wellman, ‘Sextius Niger, eine Quellenuntersuchung zu Dioscorides’, *Hermes* 24, no. 4 (1889), 530–69. On Pliny as proto-scientist, see L. Bodson, ‘Aspects of Pliny’s zoology’, in R. K. French and F. Greenaway, *Science in the Early Roman Empire: Pliny the Elder, his Sources and Influence* (1986), 98–101; and, for a more balanced perspective, compare M. Beagon, *Roman Nature: The Thought of Pliny the Elder* (1992), 26–50. Aelian 6.34: οὐκοῦν ἐπίσταται τὴν αἰτίαν δι’ ἣν ἐπ’ αὐτὸν οἱ θηραταὶ σὺν προθυμίᾳ τε καὶ ὀρμῇ τῇ πάσῃ χωροῦσι, καὶ ἐπικύσας καὶ δακῶν ἀπέκοψε τοὺς ἕαντου ὄρχεις, καὶ προσέρριψεν αὐτοῖς, ὡς ἀνὴρ φρόνιμος λησταῖς μὲν περιπεσόν, καταθεῖς δὲ ὅσα ἐπίγητο ὑπὲρ τῆς ἕαντου σωτηρίας. The analogy that Aelian proposes here between hunted beavers and men attacked by pirates echoes Juvenal, as we shall see.

See further Solinus 13.2, Hesychius, *s.v.*, κάστωρ, and Isidore 12.21–2. For Browne’s refutation, itself not free of amusing error, see Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica: Or, Enquiries Into Very Many Received Tenents, and Commonly Presumed Truths* (1658), Book 3, ch. 4, pp. 91–3. Compare *L’Encyclopédie s.v.* castor.

³ Plin., *NH* 32.13.27–31. Cf. Hipp., *De Sup.* 14, on clearing an occluded cervix, and Hipp., *De Mul. Ster.* 19, on curing hysteria.

⁴ Virg., *Georg.* 1.56–9:

Nonne uides, croceos ut Tmolus odores,
India mittit ebur, molles sua tura Sabaei,
at Chalybes nudi ferrum uirosoque Pontus
castorea, Eliadum palmas Epiros equarum?

What we should make of this is, of course, an open question, the answer to which depends, I will argue, on the beaver's somewhat peculiar ecology. Nowadays, of course, the beaver is most of all known as one of the only non-human mammals to build its own home — a behavioural trait which has always rendered it especially vulnerable to human predation. Tied to a fixed abode, the beaver is both easy to find and, for human hunters able to circumvent the beaver's noted timidity by means of traps, easy to kill. The encroachment of humans on his habitat, then, should spell doom for our riverine protagonist, as historically it often has. Hunting for pelts pushed the beaver out of much of its North American habitat after European trappers arrived in the 1700s. More remarkable, perhaps, by way of scale, is the fact that Russian hunters nearly exterminated the entire beaver population of Siberia after less than a century of occupation. In both these instances, one speaks of small numbers of trappers operating in harsh conditions, often hundreds of miles away from the nearest outposts of civilization; one can only imagine, then, how quickly the beaver populations would plummet in the vicinity of Greco-Roman urban settlement.⁵

All this is by way of suggesting that Pontus' beaver population probably did not suffice for the demands of the Roman luxury trade. More likely, Pontus served by way of a trans-shipping port for beaver products from points further north along the Black Sea coast, and the Romans, who did not always care to look for ultimate origins, ascribed the castoreum they consumed to the port at which it crossed the borders of their empire. The mistake would not be unparalleled. One thinks of the 'spicifer nilus', which grew no spices but did give them passage from India, or of the amber-lined Padus which, much to Lucian's disappointment, had no amber of its own; only, indeed, what it received from the Baltic. Already the traffic in glands takes on an air of mystification.⁶

Our discussion of the beaver's vulnerability to over-hunting should also, however, point us towards a fact which has long been recognized but which to my mind has not been sufficiently appreciated — namely, that the beaver had vanished from the heartland of the Greco-Roman world by the time literate civilizations began to flourish there. What this means is that the authors who accuse the beaver of self-castration had probably never seen one themselves and were relying, at best, on second- or third-hand testimony. Without the important check of first-hand observation, their imaginations were free to run wild. Aristotle, whose interest in collecting specimens is well-attested, makes no mention of the beaver's self-castration, or indeed of beaver testicles at all.⁷

Cf. *Nux* 155–6:

Sic, ubi detracta est a te tibi causa pericli,
quod superest, tutum, Pontice castor, habes.

On this kind of geographical 'branding' in ancient Rome, see A. Dalby, *Empire of Pleasures: Luxury and Indulgence in the Roman World* (2000), *passim*, but especially 1–2. On the geographical branding of beaver testicles in connection with the Apuleius passage with which we began, see Holmes, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 432.

⁵ On historical beaver populations, see D. Müller-Schwarze, *The Beaver: Its Life and Impact* (2nd edn, 2011), 2–5; and E. Hilfiker, *Beavers: Water, Wildlife, and History* (1991), 51–3. On the beaver's vulnerability to over-hunting, see Müller-Schwarze, *op. cit.*, 150–67 and Hilfiker, *op. cit.*, 73–92. On humans as the beaver's only effective predator, see Müller-Schwarze, *op. cit.*, 124–5. For the exhaustion of Siberian populations, see W. Lincoln, *The Conquest of a Continent: Siberia and the Russians* (1994), 146. For evidence of beavers in Archaic Italy, see O. Keller, *Die antike Tierwelt* (1963), 186.

⁶ On the 'spicifer nilus', see Martial, *Ep.* 10.73.9, with Dalby, *op. cit.* (n. 4), 175. On 'Po amber', see Ovid, *Met.* 2.356–66 and Luc., *Περὶ τοῦ Ἡλέκτρον*, with Dalby, *op. cit.* (n. 4), 88–9. Cf. C. Beck, *Ricerche sulla provenienza di manufatti archeologici d'ambra* (1968), 4–5 for an archaeological perspective that largely confirms that of Dalby.

⁷ Aristotle, *Hist. An.* 8.7.5 (see n. 11 below). Compare Herodotus 4.109.2, our earliest classical source for beavers:

ἡ δὲ χώρα σφέων πάσα ἐστὶ δασεαῖδισι παντοίησι: ἐν δὲ τῇ ἰδίῃ τῇ πλείστη ἐστὶ λίμνη μεγάλη τε καὶ πολλή καὶ ἔλος καὶ κάλαμος περὶ αὐτήν. ἐν δὲ ταύτῃ ἐνύδριες ἀλίσκονται καὶ κάστορες καὶ

When most Roman authors mention the beaver, then, they are discussing what is for them an imaginary creature. With this fact in mind, we can begin to trace the beaver's Latin literary life.

In Latin there are two words for beaver. One of them, *fiber*, is cognate with English *beaver* and almost certainly the native term. Later authors, Pliny among them, mention it as a source of fine pelts; it bears, however, only an incidental relation to the self-castration complex. The other word, *castor*, is in all likelihood a Greek borrowing, and always appears side-by-side with the myth of self-castration.⁸

Commentators on the Apuleius passage with which I began have noted the pun that connects *castor* with *castrare*, and some have suggested that this wordplay is the source of the Latin legend. This picture is at least complicated, however, by the evidence we have that suggests this pun was, on the contrary, the reason for Latin's adoption of the foreign term. The earliest instance I have found of *castor* in Latin comes from the Appendix Perrotina, generally accepted as belonging to Phaedrus' *Fabulae*:

Canes effugere cum iam non possit fiber
(Graeci loquaces quem dixerunt castorem
et indiderunt bestiae nomen dei,
illi qui iactant se uerborum copia),
abripere morsu fertur testiculos sibi,
quia propter illos sentiat sese peti.⁹

When the *fiber* (which the talky Greeks call *castor* — and they gave a beast the name of a god, those who boast of their great supply of words) can flee the dogs no longer, he is said to tear off his own testicles with a bite, because he perceives he is attacked on their account.

Which indeed, to the best of my knowledge, also marks the first occurrence of the self-castration story anywhere. If Phaedrus did translate these lines from a fable of Aesop, that fable has not come down to us in the Greek.¹⁰

ἄλλα θηρία τετραγωνοπρόσωπα, τῶν τὰ δέρματα παρὰ τὰς σισύρννας παραρράπτεται, καὶ οἱ ὄρχιες αὐτοῖσι εἰσὶ χρήσιμοι ἐς ὑστερέων ἄκεσιν.

Herodotus mentions, laconically, the same medicinal use of beaver testicles to which Hippocrates gave such prominence; but he says nothing about self-castration. I think it is well within the range of 'personality criticism' to say that, if Herodotus had known about any such story, he could not have resisted including it.

⁸ For the etymology, see A. Ernout, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine, histoire des mots* (1939), s.v. *castor* and *fiber*. On *fiber* pelts, see Plin., *NH* 32.36.110. For some archaeological evidence concerning one way in which Romans certainly could have become familiar with live beavers — military service in the north of Europe — see R. Davies, 'The Roman military diet', *Britannia* 2 (1971), 122–42, at 129. It is apparent from the statistics offered there that, if Roman soldiers did not find beavers very appetizing, they no more attempted to trap them on a large scale for glands or pelts. Cf. M. Groote, *Animals in Ritual and Economy in a Roman Frontier Community: Excavations in Tiel-Passewaaij* (2009), 66–8. For an exception to the usual association between castors and self-castration, see Sil. It., *Pun.* 15.485–7:

fluminei ueluti deprensus gurgitis undis,
auulsa parte inguinibus causaque pericli,
enatit intento praedae fiber auius hoste.

⁹ Phaed., *Ap. Per.* 30.1–6.

¹⁰ An earlier Roman familiarity with the myth is suggested by Cic., *Pro Scaur.* 1p: 'redimunt se ea parte corporis, propter quam maxime expetuntur.' This is Perry's fable 118 (B. Perry, *Aesopica: A Series of Texts Relating to Aesop or Ascribed to him or Closely Connected with the Literary Tradition that Bears his Name: Collected and Critically Edited, in Part Translated from Oriental Languages, with a Commentary and Historical Essay* (2007)), to which he ascribes a more ancient origin than Phaedrus without being able to give any evidence in favour of this claim. The silence of earlier Greek writers should, however, constitute something of a negative argument. On the relation of the AP to the main corpus of the *Fabulae*, see S. Boldrini, *Fedro e Perotti: Ricerche di storia della tradizione* (1988).

As to whether *kastor* really did mean ‘beaver’ in ancient Greek, I have my doubts; Aristotle describes it as a water animal, but attributes conventionally beaver-like behaviours, such as house-building and lumber harvesting, to another animal, otherwise unknown, which he calls the *latax*. It seems likely, in any case, that Phaedrus’ borrowing is rather motivated by the pun than vice-versa.¹¹

The last line of the passage, though, surely suggests a relationship between Phaedrus’ story and the traffic in glands. The beaver knows it is sought on account of its testicles; this is why it cuts them off and leaves them for hunters to find. Apuleius elides this element of the narrative, but Juvenal (‘adeo medicatum intellegit inguen’) and Pliny (‘ob hoc se peti gnari’) do not. The beaver, in short, is an informed and (semi)-willing participant in the trade relationships that surround its own genitalia.¹²

We may reasonably doubt whether ancient beavers had so very clear an understanding of the rôle they played in Rome’s luxury trade. It is worth noting, though, that they were not the only animals to which such an understanding was ascribed. In Pliny, for instance, we find that the elephant, well aware of the value that humans attach to its tusks, buries these underground when they have worn down or fallen off; and, further, that an elephant who has wearied of fighting with hunters will break its own tusks off against a tree, thereby, as Pliny puts it, ‘paying his ransom’.¹³

The wild ass, whose penis was used by the Romans as a baldness cure, likewise took care to provide a supply of these for trade. Pliny notes that the adult males of the species, jealous for their pleasure, seek out male infants at birth and castrate them with their teeth. The ass here may lack the market savvy of the beaver and the elephant, but we can see a similar pattern at work. In each of these cases, Pliny ascribes the supply of a Roman luxury good to what we might well call a ‘cultural practice’ prevalent among the animals from whose bodies these luxury goods come; in each case, the animal concerned somehow preserves its own life while rendering parts of its body, more or less vital, for collection by human hunters.¹⁴

¹¹ Arist., *Hist. An.* 8.7.5:

“Ἐνια δὲ τῶν τετραπόδων καὶ ἀγρίων ζῴων ποιεῖται τὴν τροφήν περὶ λίμνας καὶ ποταμούς· περὶ δὲ τὴν θάλατταν οὐδὲν ἔξω φύκης. Τοιαῦτα δ’ ἐστὶν ὃ τε καλούμενος κάστωρ καὶ τὸ σαθέριον καὶ τὸ σατίριον καὶ ἐνυδρίς καὶ ἡ καλουμένη λάταξ· ἔστι δὲ τοῦτο πλατύτερον τῆς ἐνυδρίδος, καὶ ὀδόντας ἔχει ἰσχυρούς· ἐξιοῦσα γὰρ νύκτωρ πολλάκις τὰς περὶ τὸν ποταμὸν κερκίδας ἐκτέμνει τοῖς ὀδοῦσιν. Δάκνει δὲ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ ἡ ἐνυδρίς, καὶ οὐκ ἀφήσιν, ὡς λέγουσι, μέχρι ἂν ὀστοῦ ψόφον ἀκούσῃ. Τὸ δὲ τρίχωμα ἔχει ἡ λάταξ σκληρόν, καὶ τὸ εἶδος μεταξὺ τοῦ τῆς φύκης τριχώματος καὶ τοῦ τῆς ἐλάφου.

Compare Herod. 4.109.2, cited in n. 7 above. On the confusion between these similar and vaguely-described aquatic mammals, see Keller, op. cit. (n. 5), 185–6.

¹² Juvenal, *Sat.* 12.36 (see below). Pliny, *NH* 8.47.109 (see n. 2 above).

¹³ Pliny, *NH* 8.4.17–21; cf. Cass., *Var.* 10.30.3 for a formally similar narrative:

Magnitudo illa terribilis nec formicis minutissimis par est, quando beneficium non habet naturae, quod ultima videntur animalia meruisse. humano solacio consurgunt, cuius arte iacuerunt. belua tamen suis gressibus restituta novit memor esse beneficii: in magistrum quippe recipit quem sibi subvenisse cognoscit: ad ipsius arbitrium gressus movet, ipsius voluntate cibos capit, et, quod omnem intellegentiam quadrupedum superat, non dubitat primo aspectu adorare quem cunctorum intellegit esse rectorem: cui si tyrannus appareat, inflexa permanet nec imponi potest beluae hoc et malis pendere, quod a se novit bonis principibus exhibere.

¹⁴ Pliny, *NH* 8.46.108:

Hyaenae plurimae gignuntur in Africa, quae et asinorum silvestrium multitudinem fundit. mares in eo genere singuli feminarum gregibus imperitant; timent libidinis aemulos et ideo gravidas custodiunt morsuque natos mares castrant. contra gravidae latebras petunt et parere furto cupiunt gaudentque copia libidinis.

For this medicinal practice, see Pliny, *NH* 28.46.164.

I present these comparanda by way of establishing that the story of the beaver's self-castration is no mere zoological oddity, but rather fits quite well into a narrative-pattern that Pliny associates with many exotic beasts. We may then legitimately treat this story as a myth that, as Roland Barthes defines the term, helps naturalize an otherwise strange fact of culture — namely, that a steady supply of beaver testicles appears for sale in Rome. We should read this myth, I think, against the background of Rome's economic relationship with its provinces, which was, in the first century of the Empire, more or less parasitical. Rome, that is, did not produce goods which it could exchange for the luxuries it imported; these were, rather, paid-for in the provinces' own coin, which itself had been gathered at the metropole by tax-collectors relying, in the ultimate instance, on the force of Roman arms.¹⁵

This view of the Roman economy, which used to be the standard one, has undergone a certain amount of revision in recent decades. As our understanding of the complexities of exchange and redistribution within the Empire has deepened, so too has our appreciation of the services that Rome provided to its massive hinterland in exchange for tribute. Moreover, we now tend to see the Roman economy as a polycentric network in which Rome was only one node, and not always the most important. Against this revisionist tide, however, two facts have rested more or less unchallenged: first, that Rome did in fact consume much more than it, or its suburbs, could produce; and, second, that Rome's writers saw it as eating the fruits of empire. This picture of Rome as a violent consumer city, then, reproduces an emic account of the Roman economy, in addition to having been largely true.¹⁶

In the myth of the beaver, one sees the contingency of this economic order transformed into a scientific fact. The beaver's self-castration appears here as a kind of compromise with the hunters who pursue it: he gets to live — as a eunuch, to follow Juvenal's phrasing — and they get the parts that they want. All the parties are satisfied; as the tree who narrates the *Nux* puts it: 'thus, when the cause of your danger has been by yourself removed, oh Pontic beaver, you have a safe hold on whatever's left.'¹⁷

Seen in this light, some of the details in Juvenal's beaver allusion take on new significance. Towards the beginning of *Satire* 12, the poet describes his friend Catullus' near-shipwreck on the way back to Rome:

cum plenus fluctu medius foret alueus et iam
 alternum puppis latus euertentibus undis
 arboris incertae, nullam prudentia cani
 rectoris cum ferret opem, decidere iactu
 coepit cum uentis, imitatus castora, qui se
 eunuchum ipse facit cupiens euadere damno
 testiculi: adeo medicatum intellegit inguen.
 'fundite quae mea sunt' dicebat 'cuncta'.¹⁸

¹⁵ For Barthes' conception of a 'myth', see R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (1972), 109–27. For the connection between hunting and warfare/conquest at Rome, see D. Goguet, *Les Animaux dans la mentalité romaine* (2003), 19–20. On the utility of such 'economic mythologies for Roman Imperial self-representations', see J. Galtung, T. Heiestad and E. Rudeng, 'On the decline and fall of empires: the Roman Empire and Western imperialism compared', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 4, no. 1 (1980), 91–153.

¹⁶ On Rome as a 'consumer city', see M. Weber, *The City* (1958), 208 and 226–7; and, on the 'consumer city' as an ideal type, pp. 6–8. M. I. Finley, the chief proponent of a Weberian approach to ancient economies, is now widely understood to have overplayed his case: M. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (1973), 123–40, with C. Vlassopoulos, *Untinking the Greek Polis* (2007), 123–8 and N. Purcell and P. Horden, *The Corrupting Sea* (2000), 106–8. Regarding Rome, however, Purcell and Horden engage in a certain amount of hairsplitting: they argue that the massive consumption of a Rome would have been necessary to support a 'pacified' empire even if the city itself ceased instantly to exist (p. 107). For Roman literary representations of the 'consumer city', see Dalby, op. cit. (n. 4), *passim* and S. Carey, *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture* (2003), 17–40.

¹⁷ *Nux* 155–6.

¹⁸ *Juv., Sat.* 12.30–7.

When the full hull of the ship was halfway sunk, and already the mast was swaying with the blows of the waves on the flanks, since the wisdom of the gray-haired steersman could do nothing, he [Catullus] began to pitch things overboard, mimicking the beaver, who makes himself a eunuch, desiring to escape at the cost of his testicles: so clearly does he understand that his loin has medicinal value. ‘Sink everything that’s mine’, said Catullus.

The luxury goods that Catullus then throws overboard are all somehow marked as of provincial origin: a purple vestment, almost certainly dyed with Tyrian purple; wools from Baetica; wrought silver from Greece; a set of dinnerware, also Greek, and dating from the reign of Philip of Macedon. Precisely the exotic items of luxury, then, for which the beaver’s mythic testicles go by way of a figure.¹⁹

We could say that Juvenal is playing with the myth of the beaver here: to be precise, he is turning it upside-down. Here the Roman, weighed down with the wealth that he steals from the provinces, is himself forced to abandon it by the predations of a higher power. He becomes, first a beaver, then, implicitly, a eunuch — a fortune that has to be seen, given Juvenal’s usual treatment of such figures, as ambiguous at best. Without his ‘excess baggage’ — which was, in a sense, what guaranteed his masculinity — the citizen becomes no better than one of those strange, effeminized, hardly human figures that the Empire imported from the provinces to Rome.²⁰

Is a similar inversion at work in the passage of Apuleius with which I began? Socrates, who narrates this instance of Meroe’s magical art, tells us in the preceding paragraph that he came to Greece ‘secundum quaestum’ — that is, as a merchant — and then stumbled into Meroe’s clutches because of his desire to catch a gladiatorial show on his way back to Rome. Presumably his purpose in describing Meroe’s powers is to suggest what he fears will be his own fate, should he continue his journey home. Precisely his inability to act like a beaver — like a provincial, who gives up his luxury goods to preserve the peace — is what keeps him in Thessaly. He, like Juvenal’s Catullus, is a Roman beaver-hunter who has gotten his testicles caught in his own trap.²¹

¹⁹ Juv., *Sat.* 12.38–47:

... uestem
 purpuream teneris quoque Maecenatibus aptam,
 atque alias quarum generosi gramini ipsum
 infecit natura pecus, sed et egregius fons
 uiribus occultis et Baeticus adiuuat aer.
 ille nec argentum dubitabat mittere, lances
 Parthenio factas, urnae cratera capace
 et dignum sitiente Pholo uel coniuge Fusc;
 adde et bascaudas et mille escaria, multum
 caelati, biberat quo callidus emptor Olynthi.

... a purple outfit fit for dainty Maecenates, and others from herds that had been dyed by their native turf, although a spring extraordinary for its hidden effects lent a hand as well, and the air of Baetica. He doubted not to lose his silver-plates made for Parthenius, a crater big enough to hold an urnful and fit for a thirsty Pholos or the wife of Fuscus; welsch baskets, moreover, and a thousand table-glasses, well-inlaid, from which the clever purchaser of Olynthus had drunk.

For the details on each of these luxury goods, see E. Courtney, *A Commentary on the Satires of Juvenal* (1980), *ad loc.*

²⁰ e.g. *Sat.* 6.366–78. It is worth noting that eunuchs themselves appear here as an exotic and luxurious import.

²¹ For the erotic character of beaver testicles in connection with this passage, cf. Leo, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 605–6. In Ammianus Marcellinus, we encounter a late instance of the myth that confirms us in our interpretation thus far. The King of Persia is writing to Constantius, advising him to buy peace between their empires at the price of Armenia and Mesopotamia:

postremo si morem gerere suadenti uolueris recte, contemne partem exiguam semper luctificam et cruentam, ut cetera regas securus, prudenter reputans medellarum quoque artifices urere non numquam et secare et partes corporum amputare, ut reliquis uti liceat integris; hocque bestias

One could surely say more on this point: the whole plot of the *Metamorphoses* is, after all, about the dangers that dog a merchant in the provinces. One very important thing remains to be said, though, about the Roman traffic in glands — a fact that suggests, more than any other, that trade’s myth-producing power. The glands that formed the matter of this traffic were, as we now know, and as mythbusters from Sextius forward have argued, not testicles at all. They were, rather, anal scent glands which contained a powerful musk, whence derived their supposed medicinal power. One gland, though, is hard to tell from another when you have never seen the animal to which they belong; and the myth-form we outlined in Pliny demands a gland to which, for purposes of removal, the animal that possesses it has easy access.²²

There was, then, no part of the traffic in glands that was not, somehow, mythologized. From the point of production — not Pontus, in all probability, but some point further on along the Euxine coast — to the means of production — surely not the beaver’s self-castration — to the commodity itself — not a testicle, but a rather less glamorous gland — at every point, this trade bears the weight of fiction. If we want to speak of a unique and original Roman mythology, it is to cultural moments like this one that we must look.²³

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factitare: quae cum advertant cur maximo opere capiantur, illud propria sponte amittunt ut vivere deinde possint inavidiae. (17.5.7)

Cf. P. de Jonge, *Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus XVII* (1977), ad loc. Ammianus is evidently reading the mytheme ‘backward’ in much the same ironic mode as Apuleius and Juvenal.

²² Pliny, *NH* 32.13.26; *L’Encyclopédie*, s.v. castor. Modern medical professionals have not refrained from making fun: A. Rao and J. Mattelaer, ‘The etymology of ‘castration’ and its association with the self-castrating beaver’, *European Urology Supplements* 7, no. 3 (2008), 72.

²³ In the preceding pages, I have discussed one case of what I take to be a common, but under-studied, phenomenon, not only in Roman but in Greek (and probably every) culture. For a comparable instance from the ancient world, see Grant Parker’s discussion of Indian commodities in G. Parker, *The Making of Roman India* (2008), 149–71.