

## Umbricius and Greek Shell Games (Juvenal, *Sat.* 3.74-81)

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In a famous passage of Juvenal's third Satire, Umbricius turns his attention to the arrivist Greek-speaking immigrant who, he complains, is ruining Rome with his irrepressible, ingenious and mind-boggling ability to adapt to any environment. Dripping with sarcasm, Umbricius rails (3.74-81)<sup>1</sup>:

ede quid illum esse optes. quemvis hominem secum attulit ad nos. grammaticus, rhetor, geometres, pictor, aliptes, augur, schoenobates, medicus, magus, omnia novit Graeculus esuriens: in caelum iusseris, ibit. in summa non Maurus erat neque Sarmata nec Thrax qui sumpsit pinnas, mediis sed natus Athenis. horum ego non fugiam <b>conchylia</b> ?	75 80
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Look over there! See that fellow?  
Say what you want him to be: He can be anybody he chooses,  
Doctor of science or letters, a vet or a chiropractor,  
Orator, painter, masseur, palmologist, tightrope walker.  
If he is hungry enough, your little Greek stops at nothing.  
Tell him to fly to the moon, and he runs right off for his space ship.  
Who flew first? Some Moor, some Turk, some Croat, or some Slovene?  
Not on your life, but a man from the very center of Athens.

Should I not run away from these **purple-wearing freeloaders**?

My interest here is with the meaning of the word *conchylia* in v. 81, and how it fits into Umbricius' speech. The several dozen commentaries and translations that I have checked universally take the word to mean 'purple clothes', as it does at *Sat.* 8.101 and occasionally elsewhere (cf. OLD s.v. *conchylum* 2.c), which is how the ancient scholia on this passage interpret it.<sup>2</sup> Some commentators, such as Humphries, go further and

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<sup>1</sup> The Latin text is that of Iacobus Willis, *D. Iunii Iuvenalis Saturae sedecim* (Stuttgart, 1997), except that in v. 75 I print Watt's palmary conjecture *optes* (reported in Willis' postscript, 281) for the *putes* of the mss. and adjust the translation accordingly; rejection of the emendation would not affect the argument proposed in this paper in any way. The translation is that of Rolfe Humphries, *The Satires of Juvenal* (Bloomington, 1958), 36, slightly modified.

<sup>2</sup> The scholia (ed. Paulus Wessner, *Scholia in Iuvenalem Vetustiora*, Leipzig, 1931) here (as again at 8.101) all express the same sentiment, though it is variously phrased, that *conchylia* indicates *vestem fucatum et togae erubescendam*. Typical of what modern commentaries have to say is the remark of S.M. Braund (*Juvenal, Satires Book 1*, Cambridge 1996, ad loc. = 188): '**conchylia**: purple garments, indicators of wealth, cf. 8.101. Another Greek word, conveying loathing'.

extend the metaphor to mean ‘people wearing purple clothes’. But since neither meaning follows upon what Umbricius has just said, most scholars also suppose that v. 81 marks a transition to a fresh train of thought. Consequently, Humphries, for example, inserts a blank line before line 81 in his translation.

I believe that both of these choices are mistaken, and that Juvenal had a more specific metaphor in mind — a metaphor at once more suitable in the context and more pointed in its application.

It is, after all, hard to ignore the problems that attend the translation of *conchylia* as ‘purple clothes’. Purple clothes were the Armani suits of antiquity — that is, flashy and probably a little gaudy, too, but primarily ultra-expensive. Since nothing in Umbricius’ speech so far even hints that these Greeks might be wealthy, we are expressly told to the contrary that these Greeks willingly stoop to all sorts of undignified and filthy trades. It seems absurd to imagine that we are meant to think of them going around town in purple finery.

Just possibly we are meant to envision these clothes as the reward for the Greeks’ toils, and we should therefore see *conchylia* as marking the crowning conclusion to a very compressed vignette. But rather than insinuating that the Greeks have attained wealth and are parading it around Rome like a pack of Trimalchios at dinner, Umbricius’ point is that they have become competitor-clients for dinner invitations at the houses of wealthy patrons. In other words, the Greeks are not hosting any dinner parties themselves, they are merely angling for, and indeed receiving, invitations to these parties. This is what arouses Umbricius’ jealousy and anger. Their relative poverty is presumably the only reason that Umbricius can characterize the *Graeculus* as *esuriens* in v. 78; the Greek is a starveling, and it is his hunger that drives him on to achieve such marvelous feats of inventiveness and versatility in the workplace, even at the cost of appearing ridiculous.<sup>3</sup>

It is not helpful to assume arbitrarily that v. 81 marks a transition to a new paragraph, simply because the start of a new paragraph is *definitely* indicated just a few lines later with the words *quid quod...?* at v. 86. The mini-paragraph of vv. 81-5 that would remain lacks any unified coherence.<sup>4</sup>

Since the metaphorical translation of *conchylia* as ‘purple clothes’ fails on these counts, let us try a new direction. The primary meaning of *conchylium* is ‘murex,’ the sea mollusk from whose secretions the purple dye was made. The murex inhabits a spiral shell that looks much like the conch shell, reasonably enough, since *conchylium* (Greek κογχύλιον) is actually the diminutive of κόγχη, Latin *concha*, a general name

<sup>3</sup> The characterization of the *Graeculus* is either directly or indirectly taken from Roman comedy, where the Greek parasite is often called *esuriens*; one text, however mediated, that seems to have influenced Juvenal’s language in this satire is Plautus’ *Stichus*; cf. especially *Stich.* 176-7 with *Satire* 3.152-3, a parallel that is ignored in most commentaries on Juvenal, perhaps because it makes surprising suggestions about Juvenal’s literary influences.

<sup>4</sup> Since in so saying I expose myself to the same charge of arbitrariness, I confine to a footnote the observation that in Juvenal’s poetry when a word containing a dactyl precedes the bucolic diæresis, as with *conchylia*, it often seems to *conclude*, not begin, a paragraph — providing a sort of *fulmen in clausula* or sting in the tail; cf. e.g. most famously *Sat.* 1.29; melodramatically, 1.149, 2.40, etc.

for a seashell.<sup>5</sup> This meaning of ‘seashell’ is what, I submit, Umbricius has in mind, and for a specific reason.

In antiquity the spiral shell was a symbol for Daedalus and his ingenuity, in two respects. On one level, the shell symbolized the twists and turns of the labyrinth that Daedalus, the master carpenter, had built. This symbolism is attested by the gloss preserved in Hesychius, the Suda, Photius, and Ps.-Zonaras (all s.v. λαβύρινθος) that reads λαβύρινθος· κοχλιοειδῆς τόπος, ‘labyrinth: a spiral-shaped (or ‘conch-shaped’) place’. And going in the other direction, the poet Theodoridas reverses the metaphor when he refers (*AP* 6.224) to a spiral-shelled mollusk as an εἰνάλιος λαβύρινθος, ‘a sea-labyrinth’.

Equally relevant to our discussion is the second reason why Daedalus was associated with the spiral shell, viz., Daedalus earned his reputation for ingenuity and versatility by successfully threading a spiral shell, an impossible feat. A version of the story is preserved in the *Epitome* of Apollodorus’ *Library* (§§1.14-1.15 = 141-2 Frazer), where the shell is indiscriminately called a κόχλος (‘spiral shell’, including that of mollusks and murexes) or κοχλίας ‘spiral mollusk’:

And Minos pursued Daedalus, and in every country that he searched he carried a spiral shell (κόχλον) and promised to give a great reward to him who should pass a thread through the shell (κοχλίου), believing that by that means he should discover Daedalus. And having come to Camicus in Sicily, to the court of Cocalus, with whom Daedalus was concealed, Minos showed the spiral shell (κοχλίαν). Cocalus took it, and promised to thread it, and gave it to Daedalus; and Daedalus fastened a thread to an ant, and, having bored a hole in the spiral shell (κοχλίαν), allowed the ant to pass through it. But when Minos found the thread passed through it, he perceived that Daedalus was with Cocalus, and at once demanded his surrender. (tr. Frazer, slightly modified)<sup>6</sup>

One might object, of course, that the *conchylium* ‘murex’ is not absolutely identical with a κοχλίας (Latin *cochlea*) or a κόχλος. But Latin glosses make it clear that little semantic distinction was observed among these names: Isidore (*Orig.* 12.6.50) explicitly states *murex cochlea est maris...*, *quae alio nomine conchylium nominatur*; he goes on to describe the purple color that is made from the *murex-cochlea-conchylium*. Similarly, in his Latin translation of Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* (written in 402-3), Tyrannius Rufinus says (4.15.4) *marinas cochleas, quae conchyilia vocant*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The κόγχη or *concha* denotes a shell, ‘apart from the animal within’, and it is ‘a generic term, more used in the Latin than the Greek’, (D’Arcy Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Fishes* [London, 1947], 118 s.v. κόγχη). A passage of Pliny’s *Natural History* vouches for the general use of *concha* (9.102): *concharum genera, in quibus magna ludentis naturae varietas, tot colorum differentiae, tot figurae, etc.*

<sup>6</sup> J.G. Frazer, *Apollodorus, the Library, with an English Translation*, vol. 2 (London and New York, 1921), 141-142.

<sup>7</sup> The Latin text, edited by Theodor Mommsen, is printed opposite Eusebius’ Greek text in: Eduard Schwartz (ed.), *Eusebius Werke*, vol. 2: *Die Kirchengeschichte* (GCS 9.1-3, Leipzig 1903-1909 [anastatically reprinted as a ‘2nd edition,’ with a new introduction by Friedhelm Winkelmann, Berlin 1999]). (For *marinas cochleas, quae conchyilia vocant* Eusebius says only τοὺς ἀπὸ θαλάττης κήρυκας, and has nothing corresponding to Rufinus’ relative clause [336].)

To return to Juvenal: since (i) the spiral shell of an animal like the *conchylium* symbolized Daedalus and his Greek ingenuity; and (ii) Umbricius has referred to Daedalus by name at the start of his monologue (vv. 24-5); and (iii) Umbricius again alludes in v. 80 to the flying carpenter's quasi-magical achievement of sprouting wings in the very line before *conchylium* in v. 81; and (iv) Umbricius has all the while complained of the versatility, ingenuity, and possibly even magical abilities of the Protean Greek immigrant — the evidence points to only one proper conclusion.

Line 81 should be understood: 'Should I not run away from these folks' shell games?'. *Conchylium* in *Sat.* 3.81 is a metaphor for the πολυτροπία of the Greek immigrant and the dazzling sophistries and devices of his labyrinthine cunning. Even though the *Graeculus* of Umbricius' day is no Achaean of old (v. 61), he is still the true heir of the fabled Daedalus, or of the Plautine Epidicus of three centuries earlier: even now, the Greek is *vorsutior quam rota figularis*. His ability to thread a shell is just another clever but impractical talent, like all the others at vv. 75-8. And pity poor Umbricius! For, as commentators have pointed out,<sup>8</sup> in trying to escape the Greek with whose versatility he cannot compete, he is blindly fleeing to Cumae — to the very place, that is, where Daedalus, fresh from threading the murex, made his new home in Italy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> W.S. Anderson, 'Studies in Book 1 of Juvenal', *YCIS* 15 (1957), 33-90 (55-68 on *Satire* 3), esp. 67; S.C. Fredericks, 'Daedalus in Juvenal's Third Satire' *CB* 49 (1972), 11-13.

<sup>9</sup> My warm thanks to Tobias Torgerson, whose excellent and fruitful analysis of *murex*-imagery in Catullus 64 (soon to appear elsewhere) made me rethink this passage; to Edward Courtney, who in correspondence lauded the idea proposed here; and to *SCJ*'s anonymous referees for several helpful and friendly remarks.