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The gluttonous *genius*: yearning for vitality and fertility

Sari Mattero

In Latin literature the *genius* of an individual often appears as a spirit, or as the part of the human soul, which is primarily interested in plentiful meals, good wine and all sorts of feasts and luxuries. Whoever is inclined to enjoy himself without concern for the cost of these very material pleasures, is "indulging" his *genius* (*indulgere genio, sapere ad genium, genio bona facere*), whereas the miser "defrauds" his *genius* (*genium defraudare*). Above all Plautus - whose plays contain the earliest literary allusions to the *genius* - but also Lucilius, Terence, Persius, Horace, Juvenal, Martial, Seneca, Tacitus and Servius all refer to this conception of the *genius*.¹

But what do these pleasures and luxuries, yearned for by the *genius*, actually consist of? And above all, how should we interpret them - what do they tell us about the *genius*? Now, it seems that the pleasures of the *genius* are indeed of a very concrete and material kind, that is: wine and food. As is evident, feasts and banquets can also easily be reduced to these basic components.² Thus it would not seem justified to conclude, as has been done at times, that the *genius* is avid of sensual pleasure in general - sexual pleasure, for example, is not mentioned in connection with the *genius*, but with the *animus* ³- but of food and wine specifically.

This fact suggests a very simple and "primitive" interpretation of the *genius*: it could, in these contexts, simply represent the vital energy, i.e. life itself, which depends on nourishment. With this elementary

¹ See e.g. Plaut. Aul. 724a-725, Truc. 181-182, Capt. 290-292, Persa 108 and 263, Stich. 621; Ter. Phorm. 43-46; Lucil. 26,618; Pers. 4,27 and 5,151-153; Hor. carm. 3,17,14-16; Iuv. 4,66-68; Mart. 7,78; Sen. epist. 95,41; Tac. dial. 9,5; Serv. georg. 1,302.

² One could perhaps also think that the *genius* had a "sociable" aspect and that for this reason, too, it would be fond of feasting, but this opinion would probably rest too heavily on conjecture, as such a "sociable" aspect is not explicitly evident in the passages mentioned above.

³ See e.g. Plaut. Amph. 290 and 995. The *animus* seems to be the seat of both physical desire and of love in general also in Ter Eun 142-143, 193-197 and 295; Plaut Epid. 45f.; Apul. met. 2,16 f. Ov ars 1, 237; Publil sent. A 5,41 ,43 ,52 etc.

interpretation I certainly don't mean to exclude other more complicated or "refined" interpretations of the *genius* in different contexts, which, moreover, can often easily be reconciled with or derived from this basic significance. I wish simply to show that it is in no way necessary to see in this Plautine⁴ *genius* any such abstract and modern concept as the "personality"⁵ or anything as vague as "natural optimism" or the "faculty for enjoyment".⁶

The special feast of this feasting *genius* was the birthday of its "master", the rites of which are described most vividly by Tibullus.⁷ According to him the *genius* was to be celebrated by games and dancing and with offerings of wine, ointment, wreaths of flowers, incense and cakes. We also learn from other sources that the offerings to the *genius* consisted mostly of wine, and in some cases also of flowers and incense.⁸ After birthday offerings it was customary to make wishes to the *genius*, and in the poems of Tibullus requests are made for progeny, marital felicity and a long life. These wishes could be conditioned by the literary genre or by the addressees of these particular poems, but they could also easily be attributed to the character of the *genius* as the spirit not only of vitality, but also of virility and fertility.

Such an interpretation of the *genius* is supported by, among other things, its iconography. The usual attribute of the *genius* is the cornucopia,

⁴ Plautine, because it is common above all in Plautus, whose plays, as mentioned already, contain the earliest literary allusions to the *genius*. Therefore it also seems justified to consider this Plautine *genius* to be the "original" form of the literary *genius*.

⁵ This interpretation has often been offered by various scholars, see e.g. A. Negrioli, *Dei Genii presso i Romani*, Bologna 1900, 7; G. Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, Zweite Auflage, München 1912, 175; G. Dumézil, *Encore Genius: Hommages à R. Schilling*, Paris 1983, 87-88.

⁶ See e.g. Negrioli 7 and Th. Birt, *Roschers Lexikon*, Band I.2, Leipzig 1886, 1616.

⁷ 1, 7, 49-64 and 2,2.

⁸ See e.g. Hor.epist.2,1,143-144; Pers.2,3; Cens.2,1-3; COD.Theod.16,10,2. Also the paintings of the Pompeian house shrines, as well as the bronze statuettes representing the *genius*, bear witness to the offering of wine and incense, as in the hands of the *genius*, represented as making an offering to himself, we usually see the *patera* for wine and/or the *acerra* for incense, in addition to the usual cornucopia (see the plates in H. Kunckel, *Der Römische Genius*, MDAIR, Ergänzungsheft 20, Heidelberg 1975, and T. Fröhlich, *Lararien- und Fassadenbildern den Vesuvstädten*, MDAIR, Ergänzungsheft 32, Mainz 1991). However, in these paintings we often see a little pig, too, being led towards the altar of the *genius* - a fact that seems to contradict the words of Censorinus, often repeated by the scholars, according to which the slaying of victims was to be avoided in the case of the *genius*, as the spirit of birthday and thus of birth and life. Also Horace (carm.3,17,14-16) mentions a piglet in connection with the *genius*, but the passage seems to refer to a feast instead of a real offering.

a well-known symbol of fertility and abundance, and the paintings of the house shrines almost always also present a serpent or two serpents, either entwined around the altar of the *genius* or creeping towards it, or with their own altar in a separate zone beneath the principal painting. Now, the serpent as a symbol is notoriously ambiguous and multiform, also in the paintings of the house shrines its significance has been explained in different ways or been held to be too vague to be explained. Even its traditionally accepted connection with the *genius* has sometimes been contradicted, partly because the serpents do also appear on their own or in the company of deities other than the *genius*.⁹ I, however, feel inclined to accept, in most cases, the traditional connection of these serpents with vitality, fertility (both in the concrete sense and in a more abstract one, as abundance and success) and rebirth, combined with a protective and apotropaic function, which, of course, above all the serpents of the facades perform.¹⁰ It also seems plausible that at least some of these serpents are connected with the *genius*, not only because they expressly eat from his altar, but also because they seem to symbolise the same things as the *genius*, i.e. vitality, fertility and protection. It is difficult to see why the various connotations and connections of the serpent, and its being a divine and portentous animal as such, should deny its obvious connection with the *genius*, too.

The connection of these serpents with both fertility and the *genius* is further supported by the details of various paintings; on the altars of the serpents we almost always see a pine cone and an egg or two eggs, and these same objects can sometimes be seen on the altar of the *genius*.¹¹ Even the cornucopia of the *genius* fairly often contains a pine cone and sometimes even what look like eggs.¹² Strangely enough, these details seem

⁹ See e.g. Fröhlich 56-61, and G. Boyce, Significance of the Snakes on Pompeian House Shrines, *AJA* 46 (1942) 13-21.

¹⁰ This combined symbolism of fertility and protection in the form of a serpent does not seem too unlikely, when we remember that the phallus also seems to combine these two aspects, i.e. fertility symbolism and apotropaic protection, being in addition a symbol of power. The assumed phallic nature of the serpent will not be discussed here.

¹¹ See plates 3,1; 5,2 and 24,1 in Fröhlich. Also in the painting of the house shrine of the house I 8,8 in Pompeii there is a pine cone and an egg on the altar of the *genius*, although this can not easily be seen on the plate 2,1 in Fröhlich.

¹² See plates 71,3, 75,4 and 89,2 in Kunckel, and 25,1 and 14,2 in Fröhlich. In the last mentioned painting the cornucopia contains something that in colour and texture looks like a pine cone, but has a different (phallic?) form, flanked on both sides by what look like two eggs (unfortunately these details are not easily discernible in Fröhlich's plate). Similar phallic (?) compositions can sometimes be seen on the altars of the serpents (see e.g. plate

to have gone unnoticed by Boyce and Fröhlich, who actually present the difference between the "offerings" of the serpents and those of the *genius* as evidence against their connection.¹³ Now, instead of real "offerings" these objects should certainly be seen as symbols, or at least as offerings with a symbolic significance. Both the pine cone and the eggs contain the principle of new life and so it seems more than natural to see them as symbols of vitality and fertility, and of the course and continuity of life.¹⁴ In funerary art, where these same symbols appear, they have been interpreted by Cumont¹⁵ as symbols of immortality and rebirth, which again, of course, can very easily be connected to the above interpretation of them as meaning vitality and fertility and the continuity of life. In this context, unfortunately, it is impossible to discuss fully the relation of the *genius* to these symbols or to fertility in general.

We have seen that the gluttonous and wine drinking *genius* of Plautus and others can, also on the basis of the iconography of the house shrines and of the offerings made to the *genius* (as we shall see later), be interpreted as signifying vitality and fertility. We have also seen that the wishes made to the *genius* seem to support this interpretation. Indeed, the fairly obvious connection between the *genius* and fertility and procreation¹⁶ has been admitted and discussed by most scholars, though not all. What, however, has not been seen or discussed in most studies is the rather natural connection between these two aspects of the *genius* -

30,2 in Kunckel, plates 25,3, 35,1 and 39,2 in Fröhlich, and p.763 in Pompei, *pittura e mosaici*, vol.II, Milano 1990), though with the pine cone in its proper shape. In one case (plate 49,1 in Fröhlich) the altar of the serpents is flanked by two horns of plenty, which contain a phallic(?) composition of fruit.

¹³ See Boyce 20-21 and Fröhlich 59-61.

¹⁴ And indeed in many parts of the world the pine appears as a symbol of immortality, vital force, longevity and fertility. It also plays a part in the cult of Cybele and Attis, and the pine cone appears in the iconography of Dionysos. The egg, too, is a universal symbol of creation and birth, life and fertility, of the periodical renewal of nature, of resurrection etc. See Chevalier-Gheerbrant, *Dizionario dei Simboli*, Milano 1989 (orig. Paris 1969), vol.II, 223-225, 520-524. See also S. Fasce, *Eros. La figura e il culto*, Genova 1977, 99-100, for the egg and its symbolic significance in connection with Eros, and J. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, New York 1957 (orig. 1903), 625-629, for the Orphic world-egg and for the egg in the rites of Dionysos and Liber and in the cult of the dead.

¹⁵ F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le Symbolisme funéraire des Romains*, Paris 1966 (orig. 1942), 219-221, 396.

¹⁶ Supported also by the etymology of the word, by the name *lectus genialis* for the marital bed, by several definitions of the *genius* by Latin authors etc. I hope to discuss all this material in another context.

gluttony and wine-drinking on the one hand and fertility and procreation on the other. Indeed, as already mentioned, the Plautine *genius* which has not often been an object of detailed analysis, has mostly been interpreted in a fairly abstract and vague manner. Only R.B. Onians¹⁷ seems to have connected these two aspects interpreting them in a very concrete way. He associates the Plautine *genius* with the very concrete idea of the "juice" or "sap" of life (*sucus, umor*), on which depends the vitality of the body.¹⁸ The quantity of this "sap", and thus the degree of vitality, then depends not only on the age of the person in question, but also on the nourishment he takes and on the quantity of wine he consumes. Old people, and particularly the old misers so common in Plautus, are "dry" (*aridi, sicci*), and so are the poor, the thin, the hungry, the thirsty and the sober.¹⁹

The "dryness" of old age then is often compared to dryness in the vegetable world, dry leaves etc,²⁰ which again reflects the close connection between the human and the vegetal "sap".²¹ Illuminating in this respect are also the words of the *carmen Priapeum* 32. When describing a thin girl, "*uvis aridior puella passis*", they seem to express both the identification of the human and the vegetable "sap" and the connection between "sap" and wine, in the form of the juice squeezed from the grapes. This idea might be present also in Horace, *carm.* 4,13,1-12, where the aged and withered Lyce tries to seem younger (i.e. increase her diminished "sap"), and to invite the reluctant Cupid, by drinking excessive amounts of wine.

The adjective *siccus* has an even more evident connection with wine, or rather with the lack of it, as it very often means "sober" or "thirsty".²² Often it also means both "thirsty" and "hungry".²³ However, whereas the significance of *aridus* is always more or less negative ("stingy", "old", "too

¹⁷ *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate*, Cambridge 1951.

¹⁸ See Onians 192, 212, 224, and e.g. Ter. Eun. 317; Hor. *carm.* 3,27,53ff; Plaut. Capt. 80ff, Mil. 639f. and 787f.; Priap. 32.

¹⁹ For *aridus* see e.g. Plaut. Aul. 294-296; Ter. Heaut. 526-527; Mart. 10,87,5; Cic. S.Rosc. 27,75; Priap. 32.

²⁰ For example in Hor. *carm.* 1,25,17-20 and 4,13,1-12

²¹ This might also be the meaning of the flowers offered to the *genius*, see Onians (217, 221, 227 note 6), who refers even to the fact that the flower was the "head" of the plant and contained the seed (for the connection of the *genius* with the head see below). Cfr. also the use of roses and violets in the cult of the dead, because of their blood-like colour.

²² See e.g. Pers. 5,163-166; Plaut. As. 856-857, Persa 821-822, Curc. 116-118, Pseud. 182-184; Hor. *carm.* 4,5,38-40, *epist.* 1,19,8-9; Cic. ac. 2,27,88; Sen. *epist.* 18,3-4.

²³ See e.g. Hor. *sat.* 2,2,14-15 and 2,3,281, *epist.* 1,17,11-12; Verg. Aen. 2,356-358.

thin" etc.), *siccus* can have positive connotations, too, for example in the senses "sober" (see above), "healthy"²⁴ and "sensible".²⁵ It is evident of course that the idea of continence inherent in these positive connotations of *siccus* is more to the taste of philosophical writers and moralists, whereas for Plautus, Terence, Horace, Martial etc. both *siccus* and *aridus* practically always seem to have a negative significance, meaning "thirsty", "lacking wine and nourishment", "stingy", "old" and so on.

It would seem thus that the opposition between those who "defraud" their *genius* by denying it wine and nourishment, and those who "indulge" it by offering it plenty of wine and delicious meals, is also one of "dryness" and "sappiness", accentuated by the contrast between "dry" old age and "sappy" youth, as the Plautine and Terentian misers are usually old and the merry revellers young. Thus there seems to be an evident connection between the *genius*, the *sucus* and the vitality: what pleases the *genius*, also increases the *sucus* and consequently strengthens the vitality. Merry young men²⁶ are "sappy" and full of vitality, old misers are "dry" and lack vitality.

An amusing piece of evidence for this interrelation between the *genius*, the *sucus* and the nourishment taken seems to be the fact that the Plautine parasites sometimes use the words *genius meus* of their patron,²⁷ as if the patron by nourishing them and keeping up their *sucus* became their personal *genius*, whose task it is indeed to keep up life.²⁸ Plautus actually describes the condition of the esurient and thirsty parasites, when their patrons in the summer go away for holidays and leave them untended, as that of snails which in hot and dry summer weather have to

²⁴ See e.g. Catull. 23,12-20, though the tone of Catullus is of course very ironic. For the combination *siccus et sanus* see e.g. Cic. ac. 2,27,88, Brut. 53,202, opt.gen. 3,8. Cicero of course is discussing different speech styles, but his expressions are clearly applicable to people, too.

²⁵ See e.g. Petron. 37: "*Est sicca, sobria, bonorum consiliorum.*"

²⁶ The present discussion concentrates on the male sex, as the *genius* of an individual is primarily a male concept. It is evident, however, that the contrast between "dry" old age and "sappy" youth is just as applicable to the female sex, and actually several of the above literary examples of "dryness" and "sappiness" refer to women.

²⁷ See e.g. Plaut. Curc. 301 and Men. 138.

²⁸ Partly, of course, the *genius* may, in these contexts, appear in a more general sense as a tutelary spirit.

hide themselves in their shells and try to live on their own "sap" (*suo sibi succo vivunt*), as there is no dew or rain falling.²⁹

This idea of young men being "sappy" and "genial" (in the sense of who know what pleases the *genius*) then brings in mind almost automatically the sexual aspect of the *sucus* and of the *genius*. It is commonplace in Latin literature for a nice banquet with a lot of wine to awaken sexual desire.³⁰ Apuleius³¹ expresses the same idea even more clearly by describing a pair of lovers, who, during a long night of love-making, strengthen their bodies and refresh their desire by drinking more wine. The connection between the *sucus* and wine, and the role of wine as a life-giving liquid is evident,³² but it is also evident that there is a connection between the *sucus* and the other, or rather, the real liquids of the body, that is, above all the blood and the spinal "marrow", and, connected with the latter, the brain or cerebral substance, all of which in ancient medical and philosophical literature have been considered to be the material from which semen is produced.³³ And so, according to the logic of these conceptions at the popular level, we may conclude that those who nourish themselves, and their *genius*, well with wine and food, developing

²⁹ Plaut. Capt. 80-84: "*Quasi, cum caletur, coctae in occulto latent, / suo sibi succo vivunt, ros si non cadit, / item parasiti rebus prolatis latent / in occulto miseri victitant succo suo / dum ruri rurant homines quos ligurriant*". Very expressive is also the verb *ligurrire*, to "lick".

³⁰ See e.g. Catull. 21,9 and 32,10; Hor. epist. 1,15,21; Ov. ars 1,229ff; Petron. 112. See also Onians 219 and 225.

³¹ Met. 2,16f.

³² See e.g. Onians 216-217, 227 and Petron. 34 "*vita vinum est*". Cfr. also the symbolic connection of wine with blood, and the many ancient and modern usages that combine wine with life and health, drinking a toast to somebody's health etc.

³³ For semen as derived from blood and blood again as derived from nourishment, see Aristotle, gen. an. 726a26, 737a19, 725b1 etc. Onians concentrates above all on the connection between the *sucus* and the cerebrospinal marrow, as the material of semen, citing among others Alcmeon of Croton, Hippo of Samos and Plato, see Onians 115, 118-122, 212-213. M. Foucault, in *Histoire de la Sexualité* (vols.1-3, Paris 1976-84), vol.2, 146-150, describes various theories as to the origin of semen. According to the Hippocratic treatise "The Seed" it was either formed in the brain and descended then via the spinal marrow to the lower parts of the body, or it issued from the body as a whole, that is, from all the humoral fluid (*sucus*?) present in it. Plato again (in Tim. 73b-d) sees the origin of semen in the cerebrospinal marrow, and he also, in Tim. 91a-c, seems to see the spinal marrow and the canal by which the liquid drunk leaves the body, as connected to each other, a fact (not mentioned by Foucault), which might support the connection between the wine consumed and the semen produced. The medical writers of the Roman period more or less reflect the same ideas. For Galen, for instance, the semen is the product of two elements: a certain "coction" of the blood, taking place in the spermatic channels, and the presence of the *pneuma*, which is formed in the brain and flows in to the semen at the moment of ejaculation (see Foucault, vol.3, 131). Probably the popular conceptions mirrored the same ideas in a simplified form.

plenty of *sucus*, would as a consequence also have more semen and be more fertile and more active sexually, as the surplus of the *sucus*, and thus also of semen, would want to leave their bodies. This very evident connection between the bodily fluids, the semen (male and female)³⁴ and the interest in, or capacity for, physical love is reflected in many literary passages and popular ideas.³⁵

It is obvious of course that this idea of the *sucus* as the basis of vitality and fertility mirrors a very simple and popular way of thinking. It is well known that in ancient medicine, with its humoral pathology, there existed a far more complicated complex of ideas concerning the humours of an organism, as well as its health and fertility, certainly not dependent on the quantity of the *sucus*, but on the balance of the different humours.³⁶ It is evident, too, that the "vitality" represented by the Plautine *genius* is definitely not to be identified with health or longevity. Diet and the regimen in general play a very important role in ancient medicine, and it must certainly have been well known at the popular level, too, that banquets and wine do not necessarily improve one's health or lengthen one's life. This popular "knowledge" is also attested by several sepulchral inscriptions, in which banquets and wine - together with bathing and love-

³⁴ Most ancient medical writers thought that the female, too, emitted semen, only the female semen was considered to be less elaborate and perfect, and thus to have a minor role in the formation of the embryo. This was still the opinion of Galen in the Roman period, see Foucault, vol.3, 129 and Galen, *De usu partium* 14,6.

³⁵ See e.g. Plaut. *Mil.* 640-641: "*et ego amoris aliquantum habeo umorisque etiam in corpore, neque dum exarui ex amoenis rebus et voluptariis.*" See also *siccus* in the sense "void of love, sexually cold or bored" in e.g. Ovid, *ars* 2,685-688, where a girl during love-making "*siccaeque de lana cogitat ipsa sua*", and in Martial, 11,81,2, where a frustrated girl remains "dry", "*iacet in medio sicca puella toro*", while a eunuch and an old man are trying to make love to her.

³⁶ It might also be interesting to compare this popular idea of "sappy" and "wet" virility (and femininity), present in Latin literature, with the Greek idea of the male as dry and hot of nature and the female as wet and cold (see A. Carson, *Putting her in her Place, in Before Sexuality*, ed by M. Halperin, J.J. Winkler, F.I. Zeitlin, Princeton 1990). But the apparent contradiction between these conceptions probably depends simply on different contexts and points of view. The "dryness" of the male in the Greek conceptions seems to refer above all to the presumed superior intelligence and continence of the male as opposed to the "wet" and uncontrolled sensualism of the female (this at least is the idea that emerges from the article of A. Carson), whereas in the contexts in which appear the Plautine *genius* or the *sucus*, the intelligence or the continence, or their lack, are of no importance, and the sensual pleasures are unquestioningly seen in a positive light. It seems indeed that in these popular Latin conceptions and expressions discussed above there is no such distinction between male and female "dryness" or "wetness", but both male and female can be either "dry" (continent, controlled, non-sensual) or "wet" (incontinent, sensual) depending on the context and on the kind of attitude or condition that is being described.

making - are mentioned as pleasures, which give meaning to life, but which on the other hand may shorten it by causing a premature death.³⁷ And thus the "vitality" of the *genius* must refer to something far more irrational and "primitive" than the all too rational and modern concept of "health". It might even have something to do with a Dionysiac intensification of life,³⁸ which again would be in line with the idea of the *genius* as a spirit avid of banquets and wine, and which also, of course, suits the fertile and procreative aspect of the *genius*. This difference between the vitality of the *genius* and the concept of health surely is obvious even for the simple reason that the *genius* is a religious conception, whereas health is not, even though the distinction between religious and scientific ideas of course was not nearly so clear in the ancient world as it has become in modern times.

After all these considerations we must return to the fact, so often mentioned by the scholars, that this Plautine *genius*, in spite of its apparent sensuality, is not mentioned in amorous contexts. In Plautus for example, as already mentioned, the person who eats and drinks, is indulging his *genius*, whereas the person who makes love is being "obedient" to his *animus*.³⁹ This fact has been interpreted in different ways by various scholars. For those who nevertheless admit the fertile and procreative aspect of the *genius*, it usually means that the *genius*, despite its procreative function, is not otherwise "sexual".⁴⁰ This idea of the *genius* as connected above all to procreation, and thus to marriage, and not to love-making as such, in the sense of sexual pleasure or extra-conjugal adventures, is

³⁷ See e.g. CLE 1499, 1500 and 1923. See also I Kajanto, *Balnea vina venus, Hommages à M. Renard*, Bruxelles 1969, 365-366.

³⁸ See A. Brelich, *Aspetti della morte nelle iscrizioni sepolcrali dell' Impero Romano*, Lipsiae 1937, 44-53.

³⁹ "*Animo obsequitur*", e.g. in *Amph.* 290 and 995. For other examples of the connection of physical love with *animus* see note 3 above.

⁴⁰ See e.g. F. Altheim, *A History of the Roman Religion* (1938, transl. by H. Mattingly, enlarged ed. of the author's *Römische Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin 1931-33) 61; H. Wagenwoort, *Roman Dynamism*, Oxford 1947, 191-192, and W.F. Otto, *Die Manen*, Darmstadt 1958 (orig. 1923), 76-77. Otto, however, wisely uses the word "erotic" instead of the very generic "sexual". Onians seems to see the *genius* as both fertile and "sexual", for example when he takes the words *indulge genio* in *Persius* 5,151, as referring also to love-making, see Onians 225. He, nevertheless, notes the absence of the *genius* in amorous contexts, where it is usually replaced by *animus*. His explanation for this is that the *animus*, the conscious self, is the seat of every conscious desire, whether for the pleasures of the table or for sexual gratification, whereas the *genius* does not reflect the conscious self, see Onians 224-225. This may well be true, but it is also possible to find a far simpler and more straightforward explanation, as we shall see below.

perfectly credible, but should be analysed better and connected to the apparently "sensual" aspects of the Plautine *genius*. Moreover, modern terms and concepts, such as "sexual" and "sexuality", should be used with far more caution and clarity than is done by most scholars. It is obvious, and has been very instructively shown and discussed by Foucault,⁴¹ that a modern and very generic term like "sexuality" can not be applied to ancient conceptions without modifications. Unfortunately, in practically every study of the *genius* these terms are nevertheless used in a very vague manner, sometimes referring both to procreation and to sex as pleasure, sometimes referring to only one of these aspects.

So, to some scholars the *genius* is fertile and procreative, but not otherwise "sexual", to others it is neither fertile nor otherwise "sexual". The last mentioned, too, naturally, base their opinion on the absence of the *genius* in amorous contexts. But of course they present other arguments, too, for example the detail, mentioned by Servius,⁴² that, among the bodily parts, the forehead - and not the sexual organ - is sacred to the *genius*.⁴³ This argument, however, for several reasons, does not seem valid, to begin with the fact that the only witness seems to be Servius, who is often not too credible in his comments on the *genius*. However, be it as it may - and of course what Servius reports may also be perfectly true - this argument nevertheless does not in any way whatsoever prove the "non-sexuality" of the *genius* or eliminate its procreative aspect. On the contrary, the head can in many ways be related to vitality and fertility, and can also be considered to be the seat and symbol of life.⁴⁴ We have also seen that the brain, or rather, the cerebrospinal marrow, could be considered to be the source of semen. Thus it is clearly in no way justified to deduce - as has been done by Dumézil and others - that the connection of the *genius* with the forehead proves its relation to "personality" and denies its relation to procreation. One should not be too ready to give the different bodily parts their modern connotations - which, moreover, may even today be different for different cultures - but study carefully the possible ancient ones.

But then, if we admit the procreative character of the *genius*, how should we explain its absence in amorous contexts in Latin literature? The

⁴¹ In his *Histoire de la Sexualité*, passim, vol.1 in particular.

⁴² Aen. 3,607.

⁴³ See e.g. Dumézil 87 and R. Schilling, RLAC 10, Stuttgart 1978, 57-58.

⁴⁴ See Onians 111, 113-115, 123-127 and 153.

answer is already present in the question (and in all that has been said so far), as it is precisely the connection of the *genius* with fertility and procreation that explains its absence in amorous contexts. The *genius* is not the spirit of love or of sex as pleasure, but precisely the spirit of fertility (as a part of vitality) and thus of procreation and marital sex. And this, in general, is not a topic much considered in the amorous passages of Latin literature.⁴⁵

But now there might seem to be a discrepancy between this "serious" *genius* of marital procreation and the merry and "sensual" *genius* of the banquets. This apparent discrepancy, however, is easy to eliminate, if we consider more closely the different relation that banquets, on the one hand, and procreation, on the other, have to vitality: food and wine increase the "life" and vitality (and the *sucus*) of the individual, whereas procreation, and the sexual act in general, diminish it, giving eventually part of it to the progeny. Even without considering procreation in such a concrete way, it is easy to see how wine and food "do good" to the *genius* or strengthen it, whereas physical love, at least momentarily, weakens it. The ancients often saw the sexual act as a dangerous loss of the vital force (that is, to the male partner, of course), almost as a kind of a death.⁴⁶ Latin literature also expresses the concrete idea that love diminishes the *sucus*, the bodily moisture, and thus the vitality, too. It is easy to see how this idea can be derived from the nature of the sexual act, but it seems to be applied to love in a more general sense, too: love goes to the marrow or to the blood and burns and diminishes them, "drying" and weakening the lover.⁴⁷

In the light of these considerations, it is evident that the *genius* needs nourishment in order to be able to perform its function, that is, to maintain and to procreate life. It is in this sense that food and wine "please" the

⁴⁵ Otto, in *Die Manen* 76-77, is probably referring to the same thing, when he says that the "seriousness" of the concept, that is, the relation of the *genius* to reproduction and progeny, prevents its being mentioned in erotic contexts.

⁴⁶ Also because the semen was thought to contain the strongest and most vital part of the humoral fluid, indeed the principle of life, see e.g. Foucault, vol.2, 146-147.

⁴⁷ See e.g. Hor. *carm.* 3,19,28 and Prop. 2,12,13-17 and 19-20. In the Propertian passage the lover (in whose "*siccis medullis*" and "*sanguine*" Amor persistently lives and makes war) in the end becomes so dry that he is only a ghost, "*non ego sed tenuis vapulat umbra mea*". Life is clearly in the bodily fluids, *sucus*, blood and marrow. Strangely enough Onians, who so instructively discusses the interaction of *sucus*, cerebrospinal marrow and semen, and who also describes the diminishing effect of crying and sweating on the "life-fluid" (Onians 200-213) and mentions the idea of love as affecting the marrow (Onians 151-152), does not arrive at the above expressed conclusion, but gives a different explanation for the absence of the *genius* in amorous contexts, see note 40 above.

genius, whereas sex, as procreation, is its task, and therefore is not mentioned as a "pleasure". We can now see that the Plautine *genius* is not necessarily a "sensual" spirit keen on sensual pleasure in general, but avid of food and wine specifically, and that this drinking and gluttonous *genius* of the banquets can easily be related to the more solemn *genius* of procreation. We can also see that it is in no way necessary to see in the procreative *genius* the "original" significance of the concept, whereas the feasting *genius* of Plautus and others would be the result of a "later" modification and extension of the concept.⁴⁸ Both aspects together can form the "original"⁴⁹ concept, that is, vitality and fertility, life and procreation, which depend on each other and belong together.

⁴⁸ This theory is common among the scholars, see e.g. Wissowa 175; K. Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte*, München 1960, 89; J.C. Nitzsche, *The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, New York and London 1975, 10.

⁴⁹ The word "original" is in quotation marks, as there is no evidence prior to Plautus, whereas the concept probably dates from hoary antiquity. For this reason it seems rather pointless, however fascinating it may be, to discuss the "original" significance of the *genius*, which in the absence of evidence will remain obscure and rely heavily on conjecture. For the moment at least I prefer to regard the Plautine *genius* as the most "original" attainable form of the individual *genius*.