

ON FIGS
VARRO, BRUTUS AND THE RAVEN

ABSTRACT: This paper concerns itself with figs in two distinct ways. The first part clears up a confusion about a lacuna in Charisius (Char. 123.5), showing that the missing Varronian quotation occurs later in the grammarian's work (Char. 163.12–30). It then focusses on the discrepancy between Varro's analogical views on the declension of *ficus* and his own use of the word, taking this as an example of the flexibility of his doctrine. The second part explores the semantic implications that figs afford in the story of Brutus and in an aetiological episode in Ovid's *Fasti*, pointing to their folkloric associations with truth and falsehood.

KEYWORDS: Figs, Roman folklore, Anthropology, Varro, Brutus, Ovid.

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0.1 In some chapters of his *ars grammatica*, Charisius reviews a series of nouns or adjectives whose varying shape arouses the interest of writers and grammarians alike. Is the plural of beard only for goats or do you also use it for the beard of many a man? Do you stick an aitch on your porridge when you write the word for it (*alica* / *halica*)? Are enmities and ambushes only plural?

0.2 Questions of this sort typically have a rational answer ('One must use enmities and ambushes in the plural...')¹ and an empirical answer, grounded on usage, sometimes at odds with the former ('...but Sallust says "the first" of the ambushes and Accius speaks of an "enmity"').² The declension of figs and fig-trees poses similar problems:³

*haec ficus et hae fici et has ficos facit. genetiuis enim singularis huius fici, non huius ficus est. et Lucilius 'fici' inquit 'comeduntur et uuae' et 'adsiduas ficos'. sed Varro * 'de ficu se suspendit' dicendo dedit multis licentiam ut hae et has ficus dicerent, quod usurpare maluimus propter cacemphaton.*

It goes *haec ficus* ('this fig', nom. sg.) and *hae fici* ('these figs', nom. pl.) and *has ficos* ('these figs', acc. pl.). And indeed the genitive singular is *huius fici* ('of this fig', gen. sg.), not *huius ficus* ('of this fig', gen. sg.). Lucilius [Lucil. 1173] says: 'Figs and grapes are eaten' and [Lucil. 1101] 'first-class figs'.⁴ But Varro * by saying 'hung him- / her-self on a fig-tree' allowed many to say *hae* and *has ficus* ('these figs / fig-trees and these figs / fig-trees', nom. and acc. pl.), which we preferred to use in order to avoid inappropriateness.

0.3 The issue goes beyond morphological niceties, for it touches on questions of appropriateness. Now, *cacemphaton* describes both an ill-sounding and an improper expression, and we know that the plural of *ficus* 'figs' may also figuratively refer to

¹ Char. 123.5 *inimicitiae et insidiae pluraliter dici debent*; in some cases, etymology adds a rationale to the prescription: cf. Char. 13–15 *polenta dici debet per o; cuius rei Verrius Flaccus rationem hanc reddit, quod usui hominum poliatur.*

² Char. 123.5–7 *sed Sallustius* [Sall. *hist.* 2.29] *de insidiis 'prima' inquit, et Accius* [Acc. *trag.* 38 R³] *'inimicitiam' dicit.*

³ Char. 122.15–28.

⁴ Assuming this is the meaning of *assiduus* here (cf. *OLD* s.v. 1) rather than 'constantly present' or 'ordinary'.

haemorrhoids, as illustrated in Martial's cheeky epigram cited immediately afterwards.⁵ Using a by-form—*ficus* inflected after the fourth declension pattern—is therefore a way to steer clear of bad language by establishing a distinction between *hae ficus* ('these figs / fig-trees', nom. pl.) and *hae* or *hi fici* ('these haemorrhoids', nom. pl.).⁶

0.4 The text is garbled, though. In the first part of this note, I will concern myself with the problematic mention of Varro. This will bring me to consider the semantic implications that figs seem to afford in the story of Brutus and in an aetiological episode in Ovid's *Fasti*.

I MISSING VARRO

1.1 In Barwick's edition, the quote *de ficu se suspendit* is accompanied by a reference to the second book of Cicero's *de oratore*. The passage occurs in Strabo's speech on jokes and humour. A story reminiscent of the inveterate 'wish-she-were-dead' jokes often found in the mouth of comic *senes* concerns fig-trees. It goes as follows:⁷

salsa sunt etiam, quae habent suspicionem ridiculi absconditam. quo in genere est Siculi illud, cui cum familiaris quidam quereretur, quod diceret uxorem suam suspendisse se de ficu: 'amabo te' inquit 'da mihi ex ista arbore quos seram surculos'

Other witticisms are those that suggest a joke that is not quite on the surface; to this group belongs the quip of the Sicilian to whom a friend was lamenting because, as he told him, his wife had hanged herself from a fig-tree, and who replied, 'Do please let me have some cuttings from that tree of yours to plant.'

1.2 *suspendisse se de ficu* was then identified as the quote hiding beneath Charisius' slightly altered version *de ficu se suspendit*. To tie up these loose ends, Fabricius emended Varro into Cicero. More subtly, Keil postulated a lacuna, arguing that Charisius reported a quote from Varro before turning to a careless quotation of the Ciceronian example.⁸ In agreement with Keil, Barwick signals a lacuna after Varro's name.

1.3 Keil was right. In his note, he cryptically referred to another passage which confirms his idea beyond any reasonable doubt. There, Charisius repeats the material cited above as follows:⁹

⁵ Char. 122. 24–8 *de qua re Martialis elegantissime loquitur. ait enim* [Mart. 1.65]: '*cum dixi ficus, rides quasi barbara uerba, | et dici ficos, Laetiane, putas | dicemus ficus quas scimus in arbore nasci | dicamus ficos, Laetiane, tuos*'; the topical interconnection of haemorrhoids and passive homosexuality adds a further layer to the punchline: cf. M. Citroni, *M. Valerii Martialis Epigrammaton Liber I* (Firenze, 1975), 211–3 and P. Howell, *A Commentary on Book One of the Epigrams of Martial* (London, 1980), 258–60. The following quotes from Horace (*sat.* 1.9.13; 2.2.122) are not relevant to my argument.

⁶ Martial relies on the masculine for his pun but a nasty epigraphic invective attests to *ficus* 'haemorrhoids' in the feminine: *CIL* 4.1820 *Chie, opto tibi ut refricent se ficus tuae | ut peius ustulentur quam ustulatae sunt*. On the oscillations of the gender and meaning of *ficus* in grammatical treatises see Citroni (n. 5), 212–3 (Martial draws a nonce distinction only for the sake of his joke). Later on, Priscian is concerned with the same issue: he cites Martial's epigram to show that the 4th declension form may refer to the *uitium corporis* or the fruit depending on its gender, masculine for the former and feminine for the latter: cf. Prisc. *GLK* 2.261.9; on the name of the tree see Prisc. *GLK* 2.267.3–4 *excipitur quercus laurus pinus cornus ficus, quae tam secundae quam quartae inueniuntur*.

⁷ Cic. *de orat.* 2.278; the translation is from Sutton and Rackham's Loeb edition. The joke percolates through to Quintilian (*inst.* 6.3.88); a parallel with comedy is indirectly drawn in A.D. Leeman, H. Pinkster and H. Rabbie (eds), *M. Tullius Cicero. De Oratore libri III. 3. Band: Buch II, 99–290* (Heidelberg, 1989) 316 via their reference to Padberg's view that it might derive from Epicharmus. I would rather point to the banter typical of Roman *palliata*, whose misogyny usually permits old men to reassert their bond of friendship at the expenses of their wives: cf. e.g. Pl. *Trin.* 42–65 and the examples reviewed in E. Segal, *Roman Laughter. The Comedy of Plautus* (Oxford-New York, 1987), 21ff.

⁸ cfr. Keil *GLK* 1. p. 95 *lacunam qua Varronis exemplum a Charisio l.c. servatum cum nomine Ciceronis haustum est indicavi*. Keil also remarked that the misattribution is perpetuated in the pseudo-Probian treatise *de nomine*: cf. [Prob.] *de nomine* *GLK* 4. p. 214 *Varro masculino genere dixit ita: 'de ficu se suspendit.' cuius ablatiuus masculini generis est*.

⁹ Char. 163.12–30.

ficos uitium esse corporis proinque declinari debere quasi pomum. Martialis in Laetilianum iocantis nobis occurret exemplum. nam ita loquitur ... ut sit ἄσύνδετον dictum, quamuis quidam ficus uitium esse uelint, ut doloris quasi sonitus audiatur, ficos ut fagos moros ulmos. fagus Varronem dicere sub f littera dedimus exemplum: ficus Cicero de oratore libro II 'de ficu suspendit se'; Varro quoque de scaenicis originibus libro I 'sub Ruminali ficu' itaque Plinius Secundus recte arborem ita dici ait, pomum uero per o litteram dici. fici Ennius 'fici dulciferae lactantes ubere toto'; Lucilius 'fici', inquit, 'comeduntur et uuae'

Martial cracking a joke at Laetilianus will provide us with an example that *fici* ('piles') are a physical defect and must be inflected just like the fruit (i.e. 2nd declension). For he says [Mart. 1.65] ... so that is said in asyndeton,¹⁰ although some opine that *ficus* (4th declension) is the defect, almost as if you could hear the sound of the pain it causes,¹¹ and *fici* (2nd declension) like beech-trees, mulberry-trees, elm-trees (2nd declension). Under the letter *f* we gave examples of Varro saying *fagus* (4th declension): Cicero uses *ficus* (4th declension) in the second book *de oratore* [Cic. *de orat.* 2.278]: 'she hanged herself from a fig-tree'; Varro too in the first book of *de scaenicis originibus* says: 'under the ficus Ruminalis' [GRF 72]. Therefore, Pliny says that this is the correct way to refer to the tree (i.e. 4th declension), whilst the fruit should be referred to with an *o* (i.e. 2nd declension). *fici* ('figs, 2nd decl.) in Ennius [Enn. *ann.* 448]: 'Sweet-bearing figs dripping milk from the whole udder';¹² Lucilius [Lucil. 1173] says: 'Figs and grapes are eaten.'

It is apparent that Charisius' source—arguably the 3rd cent. CE grammarian Iulius Romanus—derives his material from Pliny's *dubius sermo*.¹³ Further, it is highly likely that this lemma mirrors quite closely the corresponding discussion in Pliny's grammatical treatise. Indeed, in his major work, Pliny stands by what looks like his own decision to resort to *ficus* (nom. pl., 4th decl.) whenever he talks about fig-trees,¹⁴ in accordance with

¹⁰ The asyndeton alluded to is Mart. 1.65.3–4 *dicemus ... dicamus*.

¹¹ Velius Longus has a few notes on the fatness (*pinguitudo*) and fullness (*plenitudo*) of the sound of the letter *u*, which perhaps underlie the notion that saying *ficus* ('piles', 4th declension) would make you hear the pain of haemorrhoids: cf. e.g. a discussion of *sonus medius* like Vel. Long. *GLK* 7. p. 49.20–2 in *quibus adnotandum antiquum sermonem plenioris soni fuisse ... atque illis fere placuisse per u talia scribere et enuntiare* or p. 50.3–5 *nos uero postquam exilitas sermonis delectare coepit, usque i littera castigauimus illam pinguitudinem* and pp. 75.17–76.6 *unde Ti. Claudius nouam quandam litteram excogitauit ... per quam scriberentur eae uoces quae neque secundum exilitatem i litterae neque secundum pinguitudinem u litterae sonarent ... est autem ubi pinguitudo u litterae decentius seruatur*; on *similitudo soni* in words that have an impact on our ears commensurate to the thing they denote see Aug. *dialect.* 6 [pp. 92–6 Jackson-Pinborg] and A. Garcea, 'Nigidius Figulus' Naturalism: Between Grammar and Philosophy', in G. Pezzini and B. Taylor (eds), *Language and Nature in the Classical Roman World* (Cambridge, 2019), 79–102 on articulatory symbolism in general. An implicit association with other 4th declension nouns signifying reactions to pain such as *gemitus* 'moaning' or *ululatus* 'howling' may also elicit such comment: cf. *u*-based sound effects like e.g. Verg. *Aen.* 4.667–8 *lamentis gemituque et femineo ululatu / tecta fremunt, resonat magnis plangoribus aether* and already Enn. *ann.* 340 *uoce sua nictit ululatuque ibi acute* on which see O. Skutsch, 'Sound and Sense in Virgil', *Virgil Society Lecture Summaries* 33 (1954), 1–6.

¹² I use the translation from Goldberg and Manuwald's Loeb edition.

¹³ A profile of Romanus may be found in D.M. Schenkeveld, *A Rhetorical Grammar: C. Iulius Romanus, Introduction to the Liber de Adverbio* (Leiden-Boston, 2004), 29–53: quotations from the sixth book of Pliny's *dubius sermo* are discussed at pp. 40–2; note that at p. 37 n. 25, he recants the view expressed in D.M. Schenkeveld, 'The Idea of Progress and the Art of Grammar: Charisius *Ars Grammatica* 1.15', *AJPh* 119.3 (1998), 443–59 that Charisius drew on Pliny for the preface to this chapter, i.e. Char. 61.16–63.13. Comparison between this lemma and the one cited above confirms that multiple sources lie behind this chapter (I 15) of the *ars grammatica* but a more exact determination of their contours would exceed the scope of the present note: cf. K. Barwick, *Remmius Palaemon und die römische Ars grammatica* (Leipzig, 1922) and Schenkeveld (n. 13), 24–7. J.E.G. Zetzel, *Critics, Compilers, and Commentators. An Introduction to Roman Philology, 200 BCE–800 CE* (Oxford, 2018), 187–90 has useful remarks on the 'simultaneous variety and homogeneity of the tradition', an example of which we see here.

¹⁴ Plin. *nat.* 16.113 *ficus et praecoces habet*, 17.121 *quaedam omni genere inseruntur, ut ficus, ut punicae*, 18.245 *tunc maxime serendas ficus*.

the notion that the *dubius sermo* was composed ‘with a view to writing his *naturalis historia*.’¹⁵

1.4 Apart from the explicit reference to Pliny’s accurate point on the difference between fourth-declension *ficus* ‘fig-tree’ and second-declension *ficus* ‘fig’, the extract preserved in Charisius coheres with the previous passage not only in its citation of Lucilius and Martial but also, crucially, in its careless quotation of the passage from Cicero’s *de oratore* as *de ficu suspendit se / de ficu se suspendit* rather than *se suspendisse de ficu*. The missing quote from the passage cited above must then be that from first book of *de scaenicis originibus* where Varro resorted to the fourth declension form (*sub Ruminali ficu*), thus providing an empirical case in contrast with the second declension form placed at the beginning of the lemma (*sed Varro*).¹⁶ The apparatus of a new edition of Charisius should take this into account by either integrating this fragment into the text or (better) by foregrounding it in the apparatus more clearly than Keil and Barwick have done.

1.5 A last point on Varro and figs. In a polemic against anomalists, Varro makes it clear that he believes *fici* (nom. pl.) and not *ficus* (nom. pl.) to be the correct form. If *ficus* was right, then speakers would regularly inflect it like *manus* in other cases too, which he claims they do not:¹⁷

item negant esse analogias, quod alii dicunt cupressus, alii cupress<e>i, item de ficis, platanis, et plerisque arboribus, de quibus alii extremum VS, alii EI faciunt. id est falsum. nam debent dici E et I, fic<e>i ut numm<e>i, quod est ut nummi<s> fici<s>, ut nummorum ficorum. si essent plures ficus, essent ut manus; diceremus ut manibus, sic ficibus, et ut manuum, sic ficuum, neque has ficos diceremus, sed ficus, ut non manos appellamus, sed <manus, nec> consuetudo diceret singularis obliquos casus huius fici neque hac fico, ut non dici<t> huius man[u]i, sed huius manus, nec hac mano, sed hac manu.

Likewise, they say that analogies do not exist because some people say *cupressus* ‘cypress trees’ (nom. pl.) and others *cupressei*, and likewise with fig trees, plane trees, and most trees of which some make the (nom. pl.) ending *-us* and others *-ei*. This is wrong. For they must be said with E and I, *ficei* ‘fig trees’ like *nummei* ‘coins’, because *ficis* is like *nummis* (dat. or abl. pl.), and *ficorum* like *nummorum* (gen. pl.). If there were a plural *ficus*, it would be like *manus* ‘hands’. We would say *ficibus* just like *manibus* (dat. or abl. pl.) and *ficuum* just like *manuum* (gen. pl.), and we would not say accusative plural *ficos*, but *ficus*, just as we do not speak of *manos*, but *manus*, and usage would not say the oblique cases of the singular as genitive *fici* and ablative *fico*, just as it does not say genitive *mani*, but genitive *manus*, nor ablative *mano*, but ablative *manu*.

1.6 How come Varro himself uses this form then? In the *de lingua Latina*, Varro is making a point about correct analogical usage, not about usage in general. Just as he acknowledges the existence of *cupressus* (nom. pl.) alongside *cupressi* (nom. pl.), there is no reason to deny that he was aware of *ficus* (nom. pl.) as an alternative to *fici* (nom. pl.), and in fact he informs us that some—wrongly, in his opinion—had a preference for the latter. It is worth pointing out, as de Melo notes, that Varro’s treatment is ambiguous as to whether he believed that the switch was limited to the nominative. The fragment from *de scaenicis originibus* demonstrates that he did not. Such inconsistencies are not

¹⁵ A. Garcea, ‘Diomedes as a Source for Pliny’s *Dubius Sermo*: Some Editorial Problems’, in A. Chahoud, M. Rosellini and E. Spangenberg Yanes (eds), *Latin Grammarians Forum 2018-2019, Rationes rerum* 14 (2019), 53–71; see also A. Garcea, ‘Pliny’s *Dubius sermo* and *auctoritas*: some notes on the indirect transmission of Latin authors’, *MD* 86.1 (2021), 35–76.

¹⁶ H. Funaioli (ed.), *Grammaticae Romanae fragmenta* (Lipsiae, 1907) 216 noted this by referencing the former passage, i.e. Char. 122.15–28, in the apparatus to *GRF* 72.

¹⁷ Varro *ling.* 9.80. Text and translation are from W.D.C. de Melo, *Varro: De Lingua Latina* (Oxford, 2019).

surprising if one considers that Varronian usage must have oscillated in works either predating or less strictly concerned with linguistic issues than the *de lingua Latina*.¹⁸

II TO CALL A FIG A FIG

2.1 The gender and declension of figs kept scholars busy. Figs also have a place in popular culture.¹⁹ Menander had the personified abstract *Elenchos* deliver the prologue of one of his plays. This forthright deity prided itself on calling a spade a spade, or, as you say in Greek, ‘calling a fig a fig’ (τὰ σῦκα σῦκα ὀνομάζειν).²⁰ Limitations of space and doctrine make it impossible for me to review the multifarious attempts at working out the etymology of συκοφάντης.²¹ This is, in fact, an ancient puzzle, so much so that a character in a comedy by Alexis wondered how such a sweet fruit could describe a rascal rather than a good bloke, as it should.²² It will suffice to note that while calling a fig a fig meant speaking the truth, talking and showing figs also connoted someone as a slanderous informer and a liar. This very duplicity seems to me to explain why figs are connected to Hermes, the ambivalent god of communication, and were eaten with honey in the ritual

¹⁸ cf. also a passage in *de re rustica* where *ficus* is likely to be a fourth declension nom. pl.: Varro *rust.* 1.7.6 *ut neque ficus neque uites amittant folia*; see also *fagus* (nom. pl. 4th declension) in Varro *de gent. pop. Rom.* I fr. 1a-b Fraccaro, on which see M. Lipka, ‘Notes on *fagus* in Vergil’s *Eclogues*’, *Philologus* 146.1 (2002), 133–8.

¹⁹ Magnus’ speech on figs is a mine of information in this regard: cf. Ath. 3.74d–79a; in the subsequent speech, the physician Daphnos distills dietetic guidance from the ancient literature on figs: cf. Ath. 3.79a–80e. Macrobius is another valuable source on figs: cf. Macr. *Sat.* 3.20.1–5. On figs in antiquity see F. Olck, ‘Feige’, *RE* 6.2 (1909), 2100–51; V. Buchheit, ‘Feigensymbolik im antiken Epigramm’, *RhM* 103.3 (1960), 200–29 provides an overview of the symbolic meanings of figs in Greek and Latin epigrams, focussing particularly on their sexual connotations (see below n. 21).

²⁰ Men. 507 K.-A. = Luc. *Pseudolog.* 4; see also Luc. *Hist. Conscr.* 41. For versions of this saying in other languages see R. Tosi, *Dizionario delle sentenze latine e greche* (Milano, 1991), 139–40. Note that the Italian *pane al pane e vino al vino* links the act of speaking the truth with eucharistic symbols, which according to some contain Christ’s body and therefore truth itself: cf. Pasch. Rad. *de corpore et sanguine Domini* 10 [pp. 94–100 Vaillancourt]. Interestingly, the French *il faut appeler un chat un chat* is but an euphemistic version in which *figue* ‘fig’—still attested in Rabelais and perhaps perceived as similar to the obscene Italian *fica / figa* ‘pussy’—is first replaced with *chatte* ‘pussycat’ but also ‘pussy’ and then with *chat* ‘cat’, which neutralises the inappropriateness. Figs bear sexual metaphors and / or refer to female genitals in antiquity: cf. e.g. Pl. *Merc.* 943–5; Mart. 4.52, 12.33, 12.96.9; AP 16.240, 241 with the abundant material gathered in Buchheit (n. 19) and the examples from Attic comedy discussed in J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse. Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* (Oxford–New York, 1991) 64–5 and 117–20; for readers interested in comparative folklore, E. Naaman, ‘Eating Figs and Pomegranates: Taboos and Language in the *Thousand and One Nights*’, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 44.3 (2013), 335–70 explores similar allusions conveyed by figs (and pomegranates) in the *Thousand and One Nights*.

²¹ The cross-cultural apotropaic gesture known as ‘fig’ in many IE languages, arguably related to the range of sexual and/or genital meanings associated with figs (see above n. 21), is likely to have some bearing on the etymology of this term: cf. A.B. Cook, ‘ΣΥΚΟΠΗΑΝΘΗΣ’, *CR* 21.5 (1907), 133–6 with Ov. *F.* 5.433–4. This is not to detract from the epistemic value of autoschediastic stories which cast sycophants as either tax-collectors back in the time when taxes levied on citizens consisted of natural products such as figs (cf. Philomnestos *FGrH* 527 fr. 1 = Ath. 3.74f καὶ τοὺς ταῦτα [viz. τὰς εἰσφορὰς] εἰσπράττοντας καὶ φαίνοντας ἐκάλουν, ὡς ἔοικε, συκοφάντας) or as those literally ‘showing’ people guilty of exporting Attic figs against the law (cf. e.g. Istros *FGrH* 334 fr. 12 = Ath. 3.74e καὶ ἐπεὶ πολλοὶ ἐνεφανίζοντο διακλέπτοντες, οἱ τούτους μὲνύοντες τοῖς δικασταῖς ἐκλήθησαν τότε πρότον συκοφάνται; Plu. *Sol.* 24 and other lexicographical sources cited in Jacoby *FGrH* IIIb 636–7). Calling out fig thieves—the province of a sycophant according to Suda—does not stray far from the latter: cf. Sud. 3567 ἀποσυκάζεις [I p. 323 Adler] and note that Verrius-Festus (Fest. 393 Lindsay) define sycophants as Attic officials carrying out death sentences on fig thieves; according to his *Life*, Aesop overcomes his mutism to make his two fellow slaves vomit the figs they had surreptitiously stolen from their master: cf. *Vita Aesop.* 2–3 with L. Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations. Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose* (Princeton–Oxford, 2011), 191–2 and M. Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome. On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Berkeley, 2014) 137–40 (some other funny stories centred on figs are cited at pp. 176–7). Further, Aesop is made to wear a necklace of figs like the two ritual φαρμακοὶ driven away during the Targelia: cf. Helladios [*RE* 2, VIII, 1, 98–102 (Gudeman)] = Phot. *Bibl.* 279.534a [p. 182 Henry] (black figs for the male scapegoat, white for the female one, possibly representing their genitals: see above n. 21) with L. Deubner, *Attische Feste* (Berlin–Boston, 1962) 179–98 and F.R. Adrados, ‘The *Life of Aesop* and the Origins of Novel in Antiquity’, *QUCC* n.s. 1 (1979), 107; see also N.G. Wilson, ‘Aristophanes, *Wasps* 897: κλωῶς κύκινος’, *CQ* 25.1 (1975), 151 on the collar of figs (κλωῶς κύκινος) mentioned at Ar. *V.* 897 and M.-M. Mactoux, ‘Esclaves et rites de passage’, *MÉFRA* 102.1 (1990), 56–64 on figs in καταχύσματα and other rites of passage.

²² Alex. 187.1–4 (Ποιηταὶ ἢ Πουητής) ὁ συκοφάντης οὐ δικαίως τοῦνομα | ἐν τοῖσι μοχθηροῖσιν ἔστι κείμενον. | ἔδει γάρ, ὅστις χρήστος ἦν ἡδύς τ’ ἀνὴρ, | τὰ σῦκα προστεθέντα δηλοῦν τὸν τρόπον with W.G. Arnott, *Alexis: The Fragments. A Commentary* (Cambridge, 1996), 551–3.

for his Egyptian equivalent Thoth as a way to praise the sweetness of truth.²³ In the sixth century C.E., John the Lydian claims that fig-trees are not struck by lightning and relates that those who wish to receive a true epiphany and dispel misleading apparitions only eat figs.²⁴ The fig-tree is notoriously associated with Israel,²⁵ yet perhaps the apocryphal tradition whereby Judas, whose epithet Iscariot may actually mean ‘liar’,²⁶ hangs himself

²³ For Hermes and figs see Ar. *Pl.* 1120–2, *AP* 6.299 and a 3rd cent. C.E. encomium of the fig preserved on papyrus (P.Oxy. 17.2084) in which the dried fig is praised as ‘Hermes’ most beloved foodstuff and delicacy’ (Col. II ll. 1–4 ἰσχάδα τὴν Ἑρμοῦ προσφιλεστάτην τροφήν καὶ τρυφήν): cf. A. Vergados, ‘Hermes and the Figs. On P.Oxy. 17.2084’, in J.F. Miller and J. Strauss Clay (eds), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury* (Oxford, 2019), 309–21. The proverb σύκον ἐφ’ Ἑρμῆ (cf. e.g. Hsch. 2236 [III p. 367 Hansen] παροιμία ἐπὶ τῶν κειμένων ἐπ’ ὠφελεία τῶν βουλομένων. ὁπότε γὰρ φανείη σύκον πρότον, τῷ Ἑρμῆ ἀνετίθεισαν and Zen. 5.92) stems from the practice of dedicating figs to Hermes by laying them on herms: once laid on the statue, the passers-by could treat such offerings as ἔρμια and pick them up if they so wished: cf. H.S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology* (Berlin-Boston, 2011) 364–7. Such indirect and anonymous gift-giving practice—leaving the first figs on a herm so that others may regard it as a godsend—bears some affinity with the Neapolitan tradition of *caffè sospeso*, whereby a customer pays a coffee in advance so that a less privileged customer may later be served one for free: cf. R. Pazzaglia, *Odore di caffè* (Napoli, 2004); F. Buscemi, ‘How “il caffè sospeso” became “suspended coffee”. The Neoliberal Re-invention of Tradition from Bourdieu to Bourdieu’, *European Journal of American Culture*, 34.2 (2015), [doi: 10.1386/ejac.34.2.123_1]. The Egyptian ritual celebrated on the 19th of the first month of the year explicitly foregrounds the connection of honey and figs with truth: cf. Plu. *Is. et Os.* 378b ἑορτάζοντες τῷ Ἑρμῆ μέλι καὶ σύκον ἐσθίουσιν ἐπλέγοντες· ἥδὺ ἢ ἀλήθεια’ and note that the anonymous author of the aforementioned encomium calls the fig ‘the sister of honey’ (Col. II l. 11–12 μέλιτος μὲν οὖσαν ἀ[δε]λφή[ν]) and links figs and honey to the sweet eloquence of Nestor (Col. III ll. 4–11), on all of which see Vergados (n. 24), 312–3. Honey, dried figs and dates also composed the *strenae*, gifts exchanged on the kalends of January and therefore associated with the god Janus, who, in Ovid’s *Fasti*, maintains that their sweetness bodes well for the rest of the year: cf. Ov. *F.* 1.185–8; an implicit link with the sweetness of the truth as in the Egyptian ritual may also be said to buttress Janus’s status as a truthful divine informer (although this is rather speculative).

²⁴ Lyd. *Mens.* 4.4 [pp. 68–9 Wünsch] οὐδὲ γὰρ ἱερὰ νόσος ἢ δαίμων βαρὺς ἐνοχλήσει τῷ τόπῳ ἐν ᾧ δάφνη ἐστίν, ὡσπερ οὐδὲ κεραυνὸς ὅπου συκὴ ἀλλὰ καὶ σκεδαστικὴ φασμάτων ἐστί· ταύτη τοι καὶ οἱ δι’ ὀνείρων θείας τυχεῖν ἐπιφανείας ἰμετρόμενοι ἰσχάδων καὶ μόνων μεταλαμβάνουσιν.

²⁵ cf. *Ho.* 9.10 ‘When I found Israel, / it was like finding grapes in the desert; / when I saw your ancestors, / it was like seeing early fruit on the fig-tree (גִּבְרִית)’ or *Je.* 24, where the Lord presents two ‘baskets of figs’ (סִבְיִתֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) representing good and bad Jews: see also *Mi.* 4.4. In *Je.* 8.13, Israel figuratively appears as a fig-tree doomed to bear no fruit whose leaves are going to wither (בְּלֹא פְרִי וְרֵחַ, הָיָה כְּעֵץ הַתְּמָר, הָיָה כְּעֵץ הַתְּמָר). This imagery underlies the ‘cursing of the fig-tree’ (συκῆ) in the Gospels: cf. *Ev. Marc.* 11.12–26; *Ev. Matt.* 21.18–22; see also the parable of the barren fig-tree (*Ev. Luc.* 13.6–9) as well as the parable of the budding fig-tree (*Ev. Marc.* 13.28–31; *Ev. Matt.* 24.32–5; *Ev. Luc.* 21.29–33). All translations of biblical passages come from the New International Version.

²⁶ From the Hebrew and Aramaic root קרש, according to Torrey 1943; cf. however the criticism levelled at this etymology in J.E. Taylor, ‘The Name “Iskarioth” (Iscariot)’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129.2 (2010), 375–6. After reviewing other proposals, Taylor puts forth a new one (אִשְׁכַּרְיָהוּ) grounded on the idea that the epithet alludes to blocking (כּוֹסֵם), specifically to ‘chokiness’, a probable reference to a physical condition which the stories about Judas’s death, whether it be by hanging (see below n. 28) or by a sort of splatter stroke (*Act. Ap.* 1.18 πρηνῆς γενόμενος ἐλάκησεν μέσος καὶ ἐξεχύθη πάντα τὰ σπλάγνα αὐτοῦ), would have allegedly sought to explain: cf. Taylor (n. 27), 379–83.

on a fig-tree²⁷ owes something to this apparently widespread connection between figs, sycophants, and the opposition between truth and falsehood.

2.2 This preamble leads me to hint at some implications of the occurrence of figs in Roman culture that have so far gone unnoticed.²⁸ Brutus's Hamletic folly at the court of Tarquin manifests itself through various symptoms.²⁹ The Republican annalist A. Postumius Albinus (*cos.* 151 BCE) reports that one of the ways in which he played the fool was partaking of unripe figs soaked in honey:³⁰

Postumius Albinus annali primo de Bruto: 'ea causa sese stultum brutumque faciebat, grossulos ex melle edebat'

Postumius Albinus in the first book of his *Annals*: 'for that reason he used to make himself out to be a fool and a simpleton; he used to eat little figs unripe in honey.'

To obtain the revenge he is after, Brutus must put on a deceptive appearance of foolishness, and the fig is an ideal ally. Among the names assigned to the wild fig, φήληξ was deemed to refer—possibly etymologically³¹—to the fruit's deceptive appearance of

²⁷ According to Matthew, Judas 'went away and hanged himself': cf. *Ev. Matt.* 27.5–6 καὶ ῥίψας τὰ ἀργύρια εἰς τὸν ναὸν ἀνεχώρησεν καὶ ἀπεθῶν ἀπήγγαστο. No source specifically mentions a tree, yet plant-lore had it that he hanged himself on a tree known as the Judas tree (*cercis siliquastrum*), a name possibly originating from a corruption of its geographic designation as Judea's tree: cf. C. Linnaeus, *Species plantarum* (Holmiae, 1753), 1.374 'arbor judae'; M. Idžojić, *Dendrology. Cones, Flowers, Fruits and Seeds* (London, 2019), 142. Its bright pink buds recalled Judas' blood and the tree was believed to have the power of striking dead whoever lied under his foliage: cf. e.g. *Plant-Lore*, s.v. Judas tree (Barsham, Suffolk, rec. May 2002: <https://www.plant-lore.com/judas-tree/>) and D. Watts *Dictionary of Plant Lore* (London, 2007) 215. In other versions, the tree is actually an elder-tree (cf. Watts (n. 28), 131 and 215) or indeed a fig-tree. The earliest reference to the tree Judas hangs himself from being a fig-tree is the poem on the gospels by Juvenius: cf. Iuvenius. 4.630–1 *exorsusque suas laqueo sibi sumere poenas / informem rapuit ficus de uertice mortem* together with E. Colombi, 'Paene ad uerbum. Gli Evangeliorum libri di Giovenco tra parafrasi e commento', *Cassiodorus* 3.9 (1997), 32; S. McGill 2016. *Juvenius' Four Books of the Gospels: Evangeliorum libri quattuor. Translated and with an Introduction and Notes* (London-New York, 2016), 264; D. De Gianni, *Juvenius, Evangeliorum Liber Quartus. Introduzione, testo criticamente riveduto, traduzione e commento* (Stuttgart, 2020) 366; see R.P.H. Green, *Latin Epics of the New Testament. Juvenius, Sedulius, Arator* (Oxford-New York, 2006), 1–134 for a profile of this 4th century C.E. poet. This passage is later cited as a source for identifying the location of this very same fig tree in Jerusalem by both Adamnan, *de locis sanctis* (1.17 [CCSL 175 p. 197] *ad cuius medietatem ab occasu ille uicinus habetur locus ubi Iudas Scariothis desperatione coactus laqueo se suspendens disperiat. ibidem et grandis hodieque monstratur ficus, de cuius, ut fertur, uertice inlaqueatus pependit Iudas, ut de ipso Iuda Iuuenius presbiter uersificus cecinit*) and Bede, *de locis sanctis* (3.1 [CCSL 175 p. 259] *portam Dauid egredientibus pons occurrit in austrum per uallem directus, ad cuius medietatem ab occasu Iudas se suspendisse narratur. nam et ficus magna ibi ac uetustissima stat, iuxta quod Iuuenius ait*), with whom one may compare a 6th cent. CE itinerary to the Holy Land (Itin. Anton. Plac. rec. A 170 *ibi est ficulnea in qua Iudas se suspendit cuius talea stat munita petris*, cited in De Gianni (n. 28), 366): I am grateful to Federico Rossi for all these references. A. Porteous, *The Forest in Folklore and Mythology* (New York, 1928) reports that the belief was current in Sicily: I owe this reference to the courtesy of Roy Vickery. This accords well with the scriptures, in which those hanged on a tree are often said to be cursed by God: cf. *De.* 21.23 'anyone who is hung on a pole (γυ 'pole' but also 'wood' or 'tree' as in the 'tree of life' of *Gen.* 2.9, which the Septuagint translates as ξύλον) is under God's curse' and see e.g. *Jo.* 8.29, 10.26; 2 *Sam.* 4.12. Paul makes use of *De.* 21.23 to claim that Christ, through crucifixion, which is in itself a kind of hanging on a tree, 'redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us': cf. *Paul. Ep. Gal.* 3.13–4 Χριστὸς ἡμᾶς ἐξηγόρασεν ἐκ τῆς κατάρας τοῦ νόμου γενόμενος ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν κατάρα, ὅτι γέγραπται· ἐπικατάρατος πᾶς ὁ κρεμάμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου; see also B. Ehrmann, *The Lost Gospel of Judas Iscariot. A New Look at Betrayer and Betrayed* (Oxford-New York, 2006) on Judas and his gnostic gospel in Coptic edited in R. Kasser, M. Meyer and G. Wuerst (eds), *The Gospel of Judas from Codex Tchacos* (Washington D.C., 2007).

²⁸ It exceeds the limits of this note to examine the significance of figs and fig-trees in Roman myth and / or topography (*ficus Ruminalis*, *ficus Nauia*, and the like, about which J. DeRose Evans, 'The Sacred Figs in Rome', *Latomus*, 50.4 (1991), 798–808 provides basic orientation) or their presence in rituals such as the *nonae Caprotinae*, on which see J.N. Bremmer and N. Horsfall, *Roman Myth and Mythography* (London, 1989), 76–88 (rite of reversal); see also N. Robertson, 'The Nones of July and Roman Weather Magic', *MH* 44.1 (1987) for a useful review of the sources, though his hypotheses about weather magic are to be taken with caution.

²⁹ M. Bettini, *The Ears of Hermes. Communication, Images, and Identity in the Classical World* (Columbus, 2011), 40–84 (figs are dealt with at pp. 46–50).

³⁰ *FRHist* 4 fr. 2 = *Macr. Sat.* 20.3.5 (the translation is by S. J. Northwood). On Postumius and his works see *FRHist* I 185–90.

³¹ *LSJ* s.v. φήληξ p. 1925 postulate a link with φήλος 'deceitful' and φηλώ 'cheat' that the Aristophanic *scholia* (cited here below n. 33) seem to adumbrate.

maturity when it was in fact still unripe and inedible.³² In a sort of implicit riddle, Brutus is then cast as the opposite of the figs he is eating, for his aim is to hide maturity under a deceptive cover of underdevelopment that corresponds *prima facie* to his feigned stupidity. Riddles inform other parts of the story of Brutus as well. A riddle-like mechanism underlies both Tarquin's dream in Accius's *Brutus*, in which the play's namesake protagonist is transfigured into a ram butting the king to the ground,³³ and Brutus's offering—a log concealing a golden rod (Liv. 1.56 *per ambages effigiem ingenii sui*)—to the oracle at Delphi, whose riddle he is the only one able to solve.³⁴ Further to this, unripe figs may figuratively hint at the time that needs to pass before Brutus can reveal his true self. In his *Discourses*, the slave-philosopher Epictetus advises a man who is impatient that his brother would make peace with him:³⁵

ἄν μοι νῦν λέγῃς ὅτι 'θέλω σύκον' ἀποκρινούμαι σοι ὅτι 'χρόνου δεί'. ἄφες ἀνθήσῃ πρῶτον, εἶτα προβάλλῃ τὸν καρπὸν, εἶτα πεπανθῇ. εἶτα συκῆς μὲν καρπὸς ἄφρων καὶ μιᾶ ὥρᾳ οὐ τελειοῦται, γνώμης δ' ἀνθρώπου καρπὸν θέλεις οὕτως δι' ὀλίγου καὶ εὐκόλως κτήσασθαι;

If you tell me now, 'I want a fig', I'll reply, 'That takes time.' Let the fig tree first come into blossom and then bring forth its fruit, and then let the fruit grow to ripeness. So if even the fruit of a fig tree does not come to maturity all at once and in a single hour, would you seek to gather the fruit of human judgement in such a short time and with such ease?

Just like the fig in this arguably popular image, the fruit of Brutus's mind requires time to ripen.³⁶ The unripe figs that still make him look like a fool signal that the time has not yet come but will in due course.³⁷ Consuming *grossuli*, then, appertains to Brutus's deceit regarding his own self, to his 'unripeness' to disclose the truth about it, and to his slow maturation into the fiercely quick-witted character he will turn into when times shall be ripe.

2.3 To provide an account of the constellation rising on the Ides of February—the Raven, the Crater, and the Snake—Ovid tells a little story about Apollo and his messenger

³² cf. Schol. Ar. *Pax* 1165b [p. 166 Holwerda] κυρίως μὲν ὁ ἤδη σκληρὸς καὶ πάρωρος, ὄψιν μὲν πεπάνσεως ἔχων, ἄωρος δὲ ὢν. καὶ μήποτε φήληξ τίς ἐστὶν ὁ ἀπατεὸν καὶ ψευδόμενος τῇ ὄψει εἰς βρώσιν and Soph. fr. 731 Radt ἔστι δὲ τὸ φενακίζειν καὶ περὶ τοὺς φήληκας. Σοφοκλῆς ἐν Ἰάμβῃ· καὶ φήληκας δὲ φαμεν τοὺς πλανώντας τὴν ὄψιν ὡς πεπεύρους. A modern testament to the deceptive appearance of figs may be found in Giovambattista Basile's riddle-like description of a perfectly ripe fig as one that looks like it is wearing beggar's rags (i.e. the peel coming off it), has the neck of a hanged man (i.e. an elongated stalk) and the tears of a whore (i.e. a drop of sap oozing out of it): cf. G.B. Basile, *Cunto de li Cunti, Seconna Iornata* [p. 278 Rak] 'dapo' fatto cogliere quatto fico fresche ped uno, che co la spoglia de' pezzente, co lo cuollo de' mpiso e co le lagreme de pottana facevano cannavola a le gente.'

³³ cf. Acc. *trag.* fr. 19ff. R³ with Bettini (n. 30), 51–8.

³⁴ cf. Liv. 1.56; D.H. *Ant. Rom.* 4.69.3–4; Ov. *F.* 2.713–20; Val. Max. 7.3.2 with Bettini (n. 30), 58–83 (esp. p. 64 'He [viz. the false fool] is like a riddle—a discourse so profound that it unites that which cannot be together and is thus close to "senselessness"').

³⁵ Arr. *Epict.* 1.15.7–9. The translation is from R. Hard, *Epictetus. Discourses, Fragments, Handbook* (Oxford, 2014) but I modified his rendering of γνώμη as 'mind', probably suggested by passages such as Epict. *Ench.* 28, 41. R. Waterfield, *The Complete Works. Handbook, Discourses, and Fragments* (Chicago, 2022) adopts 'intelligence', yet 'judgement' seems to fit the context as well as Epictetus views on cognitive processes in general: cf. e.g. App. *Epict.* 1.3.3, 1.12.7, 1.12.17; note that N.P. White, *Epictetus. The Handbook* (Indianapolis-Cambridge, 1983) translates γνώμη as 'faculty of judgement'.

³⁶ Albeit not strictly relevant for the issue at hand, it is worth mentioning that a popular saying—ἀνερίναστος εἶ—relies on the arboricultural practice known as caprification to describe 'those who do not hold fast to what they may take': cf. Zen. 2.23 'You are not ripened by caprification [...] It is said that little animals which we call gall-insects are born in the fruit of the wild fig-tree (ἐρινεός) that bears figs. Farmers take these and fasten them upon the branches of the fig-trees (συκαὶ) in order that their fruit may not fall off. Entering into the figs (φήληκες) the little animal strengthens them and brings them to maturity. For this reason, the proverb is said about those who do not hold fast to what they may take.'

³⁷ Marcus Aurelius compares those who expect a fool not to err to those who expect a fig-tree not to produce sap in its fruits: cf. M. Ant. 12.16 ὅτι ὁ μὴ θέλων τὸν φαῦλον ἀμαρτάνειν ὁμοίος τῷ μὴ θέλοντι τὴν συκὴν ὀπὸν ἐν τοῖς σύκοις φέρειν; this is however a generic *adynaton*: see *ibid.* 4.6.

bird, the raven.³⁸ Entrusted with the task of filling a crater with water and bringing it back to his master, the bird lingers by ‘a fig-tree ... thickly covered with fruit that was still hard’ (Ov. *F.* 2.253 *adhuc duris ficus densissima pomis*) and waits until these *grossuli* ripen. Upon his return, he presents a snake to Apollo and lies about the cause of his delay (Ov. *F.* 2.258 *fictaque uerba refert*).³⁹ It has been observed that *ficta* may yield a pun on *ficus*.⁴⁰ Be it a coincidence or not, as messenger of a god, the raven is like Hermes exposed to the dynamics of truth and falsehood.⁴¹ Out of all the fruits poets could choose from,⁴² figs may have been picked to bring out just this aspect of the aetiology.

2.4 Further examples may lie out there for scholars to find. For instance, there might more to the fact that it is a seller of figs who gives Crassus an *omen* before Carrhae than just the assonance based on their provenance from Kaunos.⁴³ At any rate, I hope to have at least given an idea of how clusters of meaning gravitating around truth and falsehood interlock around this fruit.

³⁸ The same *aition* for this composite constellation (ἄστρον κοινόν) occurs in Eratosth. *Cat.* 41; Hyg. *astr.* 2.40; Sch. Basil. Germ. 429–30 [p. 367.1–10 Dell’Era]; see M. Robinson, *Ovid Fasti Book 2. Edited with an Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, 2011), 198–206 and C.E. Newlands, ‘Ovid’s Ravenous Raven’, *CJ* 86.3 (1991).

³⁹ As a punishment for his lie, ravens are condemned to suffer thirst for sixty days before figs ripen: cf. Plin. *nat.* 10.32.

⁴⁰ Newlands (n. 39), 249 n. 27 ‘The false words of the raven betray the source of this deception, for they are both fictitious and smeared with the source of their deceit, the figs.’ On the ‘motif of deceiving’ see C.E. Newlands, *Playing with Time. Ovid and the Fasti* (Ithaca-London, 1995), 158–9 and Robinson (n. 39), 204.

⁴¹ In Ov. *Met.* 2.540ff., the crow (*cornix*) is punished for telling Apollo a truth about his lover that the god did not want to hear: cf. Newlands (n. 39), 253–5 with a focus on the intertextual value of this similarity.

⁴² It is in fact corn (λήϊον) the raven waits to ripen in Aelian’s version: cf. Ael. *NA* 1.47 ὁ δὲ ἐντυγχάνει λήϊω βαθεῖ μὲν, ἔτι δὲ χλωρῶ, καὶ μένει ἔστ’ ἂν αὐὸν γένηται, τῶν πυρῶν παραχναῦσαι βουλόμενος, καὶ τοῦ προστάγματος ὀλιγόρησε. Note that a fig-tree and crows appear in an elegiac couplet ascribed to Archilochos: cf. Archil. fr. 331 West, on which see A. Nicolosi, *Archiloco. Elegie*, (Bologna, 2013) 191–7; A. Nicolosi, ‘Archilochus’ Elegiac Fragments: Textual and Exegetical Notes’, in L. Swift and C. Carey (eds), *Iambus and Elegy: New Approaches* (Oxford, 2016), 185–9; L. Swift, *Archilochus. The Poems. Introduction, Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Oxford, 2019), 431–3 and see also Phoen. fr. 2.9 Powell and *AP* 12.185. Crates compared the riches of the wealthy to fig-trees on a crag: in the simile, the raven and the kite map onto typically deceitful characters such as the prostitute and the flatterer: cf. Stob. 3.15.10 with Buchheit (n. 20), 204–10; see also the fig-branches mentioned in the simile between cicadas and Athenians at Ar. *Av.* 40 with N. Dunbar, *Aristophanes. Birds* (Oxford, 1998) 118 ‘but possibly Ar. ... would expect at least some of his audience to do a “double take” ... and connect κραδῶν with the συκοφάνται who were for Ar. such a plague in Athenian life.’

⁴³ Cic. *Div.* 2.84 *cum M. Crassus exercitum Brundisii imponeret, quidam in portu caricas Cauno aduectas uendens “Cauneas” clamitabat*, on which see S. Timpanaro, *Cicerone, Della Divinazione*, (Milano, 1998), 378–9 and A.R. Dyck, *A Commentary on Cicero, De Divinatione II* (Ann Arbor, 2020), 192–3.