

“Vile poetry and worse taste”

Chris McManus
Dept of Psychology
University College London
Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, UK

i.mcmanus@ucl.ac.uk

The ancient gods were
Slow but inexorable;
Like the Ignobel.

Scientists often used published results in verse, the *De rerum natura* of the 1st century BC Roman poet Lucretius perhaps being the finest. As late as the end of the eighteenth century, Erasmus Darwin, the grandfather of Charles, published *The Botanic Garden*, a long poem in heroic couplets in imitation of Pope, which contained an early theory of evolution. Even the mathematician Leibniz could not resist writing in verse when he heard of an unusual patient with *situs inversus*, the complete left-right reversal of the organs of the body, although Sir Thomas Watson (1836) later described the result as a “strange medley of vile poetry and worse taste”:

*"La nature, peu sage, et sans doute en débauche,
Plaça la foie au côté gauche;
Et de même, vice-versa,
Le cœur à la droite plaça."*

Half a life-time ago, in 1976, I published in *Nature* a curious little paper entitled ‘Scrotal asymmetry in man and ancient sculpture’ (McManus 1976). Despite being only 353 words long, and hidden deep in the bottom right hand corner of a page at the back of the magazine, somehow it avoided the total obscurity which should have been its fate. The essential result was replicated a few months later by a genuine classical scholar, then at the start of his career, who studied *kouroi*, the much earlier set of pre-classical sculptures (Stewart 1976), and who has subsequently gone on to be the doyenne of scholars of classical sculpture ((Stewart 1990; Stewart 1997)). The *Nature* paper also provoked a discussion of whether Rodin could be diagnosed as dyslexic on the basis of the conspicuously reversed scrotum in his sculpture *The Age of Bronze* (a reversal not visible, it must be said, in photographs of the well-endowed Belgian soldier, Auguste Neyt, who was the model, (Korn 1997)). Public recognition of scrotal asymmetry probably reached its peak in Britain when the Rodin article featured in Pseud’s Corner in the satirical journal *Private Eye* (Morgan 1977).

Attention then waned, and I did little with the topic itself, other than including a more detailed chapter in my PhD thesis (McManus 1979), although I have continued to research the topic of lateralisation (McManus 2002). A few aficionados sometimes mentioned the scrotal asymmetry paper during the coffee breaks of conferences, and there was the occasional scholarly reference in books on lateralisation (Bradshaw & Rogers 1993), or, particularly pleasingly, on Greek sculpture (Métraux 1995). Once the work was cited in the most unlikely context of a paper on high-temperature superconductivity (Bud’ko, Kogan, & Canfield 2002), the old tradition of the academic joke flourishing as a result of the *Physical*

Review still not publishing the titles of papers in its bibliographies, and neither its editors nor its reviewers bothering to check citations.

I thought that my most notorious paper had gone gently into the good night of oblivion until in October 2002 it was resurrected for an Ig Nobel Prize for Medicine, stimulating sub-editors the world over to spawn bad head-lines, my favourite being “Oddball scientist wins prize”.

The Ig ceremony provided a problem. How to present this recondite research to an audience already finally tuned to the absurdities of ignobility? If verse was good enough for Lucretius, Erasmus Darwin and Leibniz, then it would have to do for me. Because the ceremony was in Harvard, the obvious form had to be the trochaic tetrameters of Harvard’s Smith Professor of Modern Languages for two decades, the aptly named Longfellow – obvious despite, or perhaps because, “every imitation turn[s] to parody” (Fenton 2002).

The Ig ceremony itself impressed me with its 24/7 presentations, technical scientific areas being summarised firstly in 24 seconds, and then in just 7 words. I therefore finish here with a limerick, a clerihew, and a *haiku*, which I hope avoid being “tedious and brief”.

Ball park estimate

By the thigh tops, by the groin ends,
Just in front the perineum,
Lies the sac they call the scrotum,
with the vasa deferentia,
and the epididymes.

In that scrotum lie the testes
On the right side and the left side
At the first glance seem symmetric
Left and right side each the same size

That may seem to be straightforward,
But it isn’t, have a good look,
Close inspection shows the difference:
Use the eye-ball, check the right ball,
Clearly higher than the left ball;
Also size balls with the eye balls,
Though the right ball may be higher
it is also bigger, larger.
Without doubt the balls are different,
Symmetry is not the case here.

Test the difference using chi-square,
Use a t-test, try a sign test,
Test it with a correlation
Spearman, Pearson, tetrachoric
Even Kolmogorov-Smirnov,
Null hypothesis rejected!

Ancient Greece – they liked their young boys,
Loved them even, called them *kouroi*.
Even Socrates and Plato,
Dined with them at their symposia,

In museums find their statues
White and smooth of Paros marble,
Sculpted in their every detail
Every muscle every sinew
Front and rear view, limbs and torso.

Got them right but made one error:
Got the balls wrong! — Even though the
Right was higher (as it should be),
There was still a chiral error,
Left the bigger – not the smaller.

Ideas were the basic problem,
Ideas dating back for eons,
Talked about by all Greek thinkers,
Hippocratic or Platonic,
Even by the Pre-Socratics,
For Pythagoras it seemed so,
And Anaxogoras also,
Even to Parmenides, and
To Empedocles as well, that
Right side differs from the left side.

Aristotle gave the reasons.
In synopsis, what he said was
That the balls had but one function,
Act as weights and stretch the body,
Pull the larynx, make the voice drop,
Introducing adolescence.

As a theory it was quite good
But it had an implication
If the left ball's lower, heavier
It must also be the big ball
So the right must be the *smaller*.

Though the sculptors thought it made sense
There's an error, that's apparent.
To describe it, Greek is no use,
Here one cannot say '*Eureka!*'
But instead needs Anglo-Saxon:
It's an error, it's a cock up!
Some would say they 'Made a balls up'.

What went wrong here, what's the problem,
Where's the error, that misled them?
Observations disregarded,
Ideas triumphed over data,
Theories may be nice and pretty
but there's more than that to science.

At the end we need a moral
Something true while yet ig-nobel
Don't get misled by a model
(be it theory or those kouroi...).

The limerick, the clerihew and the *haiku*:

A kouros portrayed by a sculptor
Said, "My scrotum is clearly in error,
 Though my right ball is higher
 It is also the larger,
Next time, better check with a doctor".

Kouroi
Aren't hoi polloi.
Plebs have the right testis larger,
But a sculpture has marbles *vice versa*.

Left testis larger.
Greek sculptors influenced by
Theory not data.

References

- Bradshaw, J. & Rogers, L. 1993, *The evolution of lateral asymmetries, language, tool use, and intellect* Academic Press, San Diego.
- Bud'ko, S. L., Kogan, V. G., & Canfield, P. C. 2002, "Determination of superconducting anisotropy from magnetization data on random powders as applied to $\text{LuNi}_{2\text{B}2\text{C}}$, $\text{YNi}_{2\text{B}2\text{C}}$ and MgB_2 ", *Physical Review B*, vol. 64, pp. 180506-1-180506-4.
- Fenton, J. 2002, *An introduction to English poetry* Penguin-Viking, London.
- Korn, I. 1997, *Auguste Rodin: Master of sculpture* Todtri, New York.
- McManus, I. C. 1976, "Scrotal asymmetry in man and in ancient sculpture", *Nature*, vol. 259, p. 426.
- McManus, I. C. 1979, *Determinants of laterality in man* Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge.
- McManus, I. C. 2002, *Right hand, left hand: The origins of asymmetry in brains, bodies, atoms and cultures* Weidenfeld and Nicolson / Harvard University Press, London, UK / Cambridge, MA.
- Métraux, G. P. R. 1995, *Sculptors and physicians in fifth-century Greece* McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston.
- Morgan, M. J. 1977, "Scrotal asymmetry and Rodin's dyslexia", *Private Eye*, vol. 1st April 1977, p. 5.
- Stewart, A. F. 1976, "Scrotal asymmetry: An appendix", *Nature*, vol. 262, p. 155.
- Stewart, A. 1990, *Greek sculpture: An exploration* Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Stewart, A. 1997, *Art, desire, and the body in ancient Greece* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Watson, T. 1836, "An account of some cases of transposition observed in the human body", *London Medical Gazette*, vol. 18, pp. 393-403.