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# The Origin of Eureka

JOCELYN PENNY SMALL

WHILE RIFFLING through various obscure sources on Vitruvius, I came across the following antidote\* preserved in Latin by Albertus Peccator, a late medieval monk, who claims to have read the story in an Arabic translation, now lost, of the *Gnomic Sundials*, attributed to Aulus the Gellid, who discovered the account in the dismal, but fortunately destroyed, *Mathematica Misanthropica* of Papyrus Perplexus whose floruit coincided with that of Archimedes in the Hellenistic period. Despite the antidote's trials and tribulations, the fact that it has survived until now means it must surely be true. My translation is based on the *editio princeps* of Hans-Georg Vorlesungsverzeichnis.

Everyone knows the story about Archimedes, who in the midst of his ablutions abruptly extricated himself from his bathtub to run through town yelling "Eureka" over and over again. Anyone, however, who actually knows Archimedes, knows that he would never run, because his ruminations forced him to shamble from side to side as he slowly winched his way forward. The truth is that the antidote was an account of something that had happened to Archimedes' Uncle Arthur. Arthur was getting on in years and was, well, to put it bluntly, a dirty old man. No, not the kind immortalized in the floors of churches by the abbreviation, DOM, but the other sort who did not believe that cleanliness was next to godliness. Eventually it was just too much for the local citizenry to be downwind from him. So they passed a

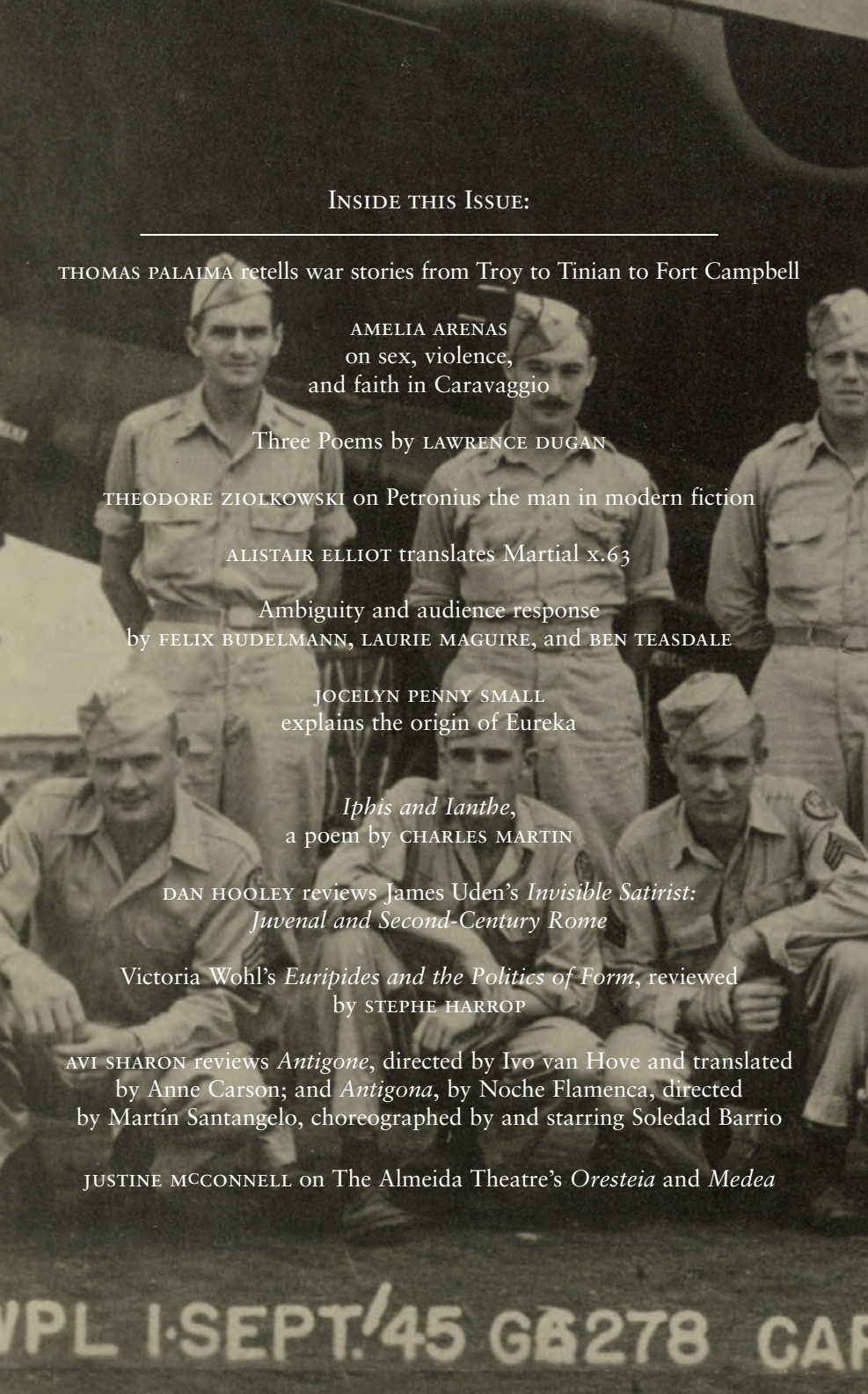
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\*So-called, because it was written before the *Dotus*, a collection of learned musings on the perils of aging and entering one's dotage; whereas the *Antidotes* focused on miraculous, often impossible, panaceas to avoid the "dotum."

proclamation that his relatives had to take action or they would be ostrich-sized. Whereupon they banded together, ambushed Arthur, stripped him of his clothes, and forced him to take a bath. At the end of the bath, after sniffing each armpit, he marveled at his new self and declared: “If you take a bath, *you reek a bit less.*” And that is the true origin of Eureka.

#### NOTE

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to James Tatum who has gone from marking one of my puns as “euphony” many a year ago to such enthusiastic support and encouragement that he nobly volunteered himself as midwife to the publication of this account.



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