LESBIANTIQUITY

POMPEIAN GRAFFITISTE

TRUST ME

MEN ARE FICKLE

THE TRANSLATOR

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I work prevalently on classical and medieval Latin literature, which I investigate through modern theoretical approaches (such as gender theory, posthumanism, and eco-criticism). As a bisexual woman, I am interested in uncovering female voices in Antiquity (and beyond), particularly those challenging traditional gender identities and social roles. My main book project explores motherhood in Ovid's Heroides through feminist readings. When I'm not reading, teaching, or writing about ancient texts, I like swimming and playing football.

ANONYMOUS POMPEIAN WOMAN

During an excavation of a narrow alley in Pompeii's ninth region in 1888, a love poem was discovered, graffitied on the wall. CIL 4.5296 has incited scholarly discussions concerning the circumstances of its composition, as well as the socio-cultural background of its writer(s).

Perhaps more than other elements, the gender identity of the author – or the persona – of this inscription has been long debated. In particular, many scholars[1] have seen as problematic the fact that both the poem's addressee and the speaker seem to be females, as confirmed by the vocative *pupula* (an affectionate diminutive of *puella*, meaning 'doll / puppet / tiny girl / poppet', referring to the addressee; line 3) and the past participle *perdita* ('lost', referring to the speaker; line 5). To heteronormalize the inscription, these (and other) scholars have built up a mountain of (mostly unnecessary) philological and epigraphic explanations, which include considering *perdita* as an ablative that agrees with *nocte* ('night', line 5) or even postulating a change of speaker within the poem, so that the persona uttering the vocative *pupula* would be male. The gender 'queerness' of CIL 4.5296 has been recovered and defended in more recent years, and accordingly the inscription is now regarded as one of the very few pieces of evidence of (potential) female homoerotic poetry in ancient Rome.[2]

Very recently (2023) the graffito has sparked queer artistic reception in the form of a graphic short story by classicist Jillian White.[3]

The graffito is now stored in the Naples Archaeological Museum.

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[1] Such as Della Valle (1937); Magaldi (1930); Della Corte (1958); Lindsay (1960); and Gigante (1979).
[2] See Milnor (2014).
[3] https://filledebilitis.wordpress.com/2024/02/17/o-utinam-liceat-cil-4-5296/.

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ROOT & BRANCH
READING GUIDE

Our translations branch out to explore

a variety of options for the text:

any variants in the original ⟨ Greek / Latin ⟩ texts

and the various possible meanings in English.

Our translations are rooted in the words

of the original text, replicating when possible

word order, root meanings of words, and

grammatical gender ⎛ [n] / [f] / [m] ⎞ of words about people.

You, the reader, will choose which branches you prefer to follow.

CIL 4.5296

Oh, if only ⟨it were legitimate / I were allowed⟩ to ⟨keep / hold⟩ wrapped around [my] neck

[your] little arms and to bring kisses to [your] tender little lips!

Come now, [my] ⟨tiny girl / doll / puppet / poppet⟩ [f]; to the winds your joys ⟨trust / entrust⟩.

⟨Trust / Entrust to⟩ me: ⟨fleeting / fickle / light⟩ is the nature of men.

5 Often, ⟨as I was / while⟩ staying ⟨awake / vigilant⟩ – ⟨lost [f] / a woman lost⟩ in the middle of the night –

⟨you were meditating these things with me / meditating these things with myself⟩ : many of those Fortune ⟨lifted up / elevated⟩ high,

these now, ⟨suddenly / quickly⟩ thrown down and ⟨cast down headfirst / precipitated⟩, she oppresses.

Thus, just as ⟨Venus / sex⟩ suddenly joined the bodies of lovers,

the [day]light divides [them] and *separates [them]…*

O utinam liceat collo complexa tenere
brac<ch>iola et teneris || oscula ferre label<l>is.
i nunc, ventis tua gaudia, pupula, crede. ||
Crede mihi, levis est natura virorum.
5 Saepe ego cu<m> media || vigilare<m> perdita nocte,
haec mecum ⟨medita<ri>s / medita<n>s⟩: multos || Fortuna quos supstulit alte
hos modo proiectos subito || praecipitesque premit.
Sic Venus ut subito coiunxit || corpora amantum,
dividit lux et se*[iungit …*

NOTES

• As happens in other Pompeian graffiti, the physical line breaks on the wall do not follow the metrical schema, so the text originally written in seven lines is, in fact, a nine-line poem. The original (physical) line breaks are indicated in the Latin text by ||. In terms of meter, the text has 'clear affiliations' with hexametric or elegiac poetry (as noted by Milnor 2014 pp. 206–7), which suggest that the graffito might have been a rearrangement of some form of written poetry.

• The graffito's spelling, which is corrected in <brackets>, reflects a language usage that is commonly ascribed to 'vulgar Latin', namely popular, non-formal Latin. Features of vulgar Latin include the use of a non-deponent form for a deponent verb (e.g., perhaps, *meditas*, line 6) and the loss of the final 'm' (e.g. *vigilare<m>*, line 5).

4 Fickleness and changeability are stereotypically attributed to women in Latin elegiac poetry written by men (see e.g. Catullus 70; Propertius 2.5). The evocation of these motifs in this context not only produces a gender role reversal but also holds an argumentative function, as the potential female writer seems to imply that she would be a preferable choice for her beloved, as men (*viri*), not women, are unreliable.

6 *medita<ri>s / medita<n>s*: the original graffito reads *meditas*, but this is considered a mistake from the author/graffitiste (see Milnor 2014 p. 98, and the note above on deponent verbs in vulgar Latin). The first conjecture for the missing letter(s) is from Sogliano (1888), the second from Mau & Zangemeister (1909). The two different readings bear very different implications for the poem's scenario. *Meditans*, 'meditating', leaves the sentence without a main clause, and shows the author alone at night. *Meditaris*, 'you were meditating', makes the poem more dialogic, as the second-person form directly addresses the author's interlocutor and (plausibly) beloved, and shows them together at night. Linguistically, *meditaris* is more likely to be the correct reading.

9 *se[iungit*: in the final line, the sentence is unfinished. Therefore, 'it is impossible to know whether' the letters *se* 'are a word in their own right (the reflexive pronoun in the accusative or ablative) or the beginning of a new word such as *seiungit*' (Milnor 2014 p. 197 n. 17).
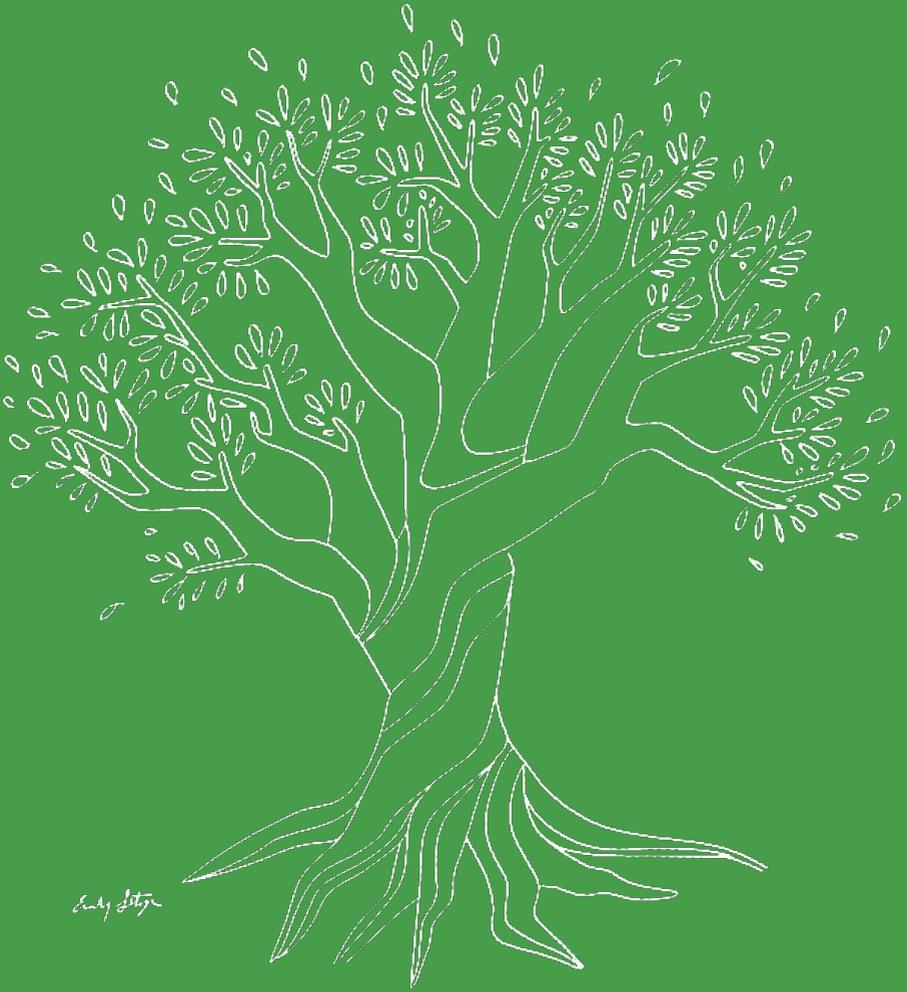
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