Optima tu proprii nominis auctor:
The semantics of female authorship
in ancient Rome, from Sulpicia to Proba[1]

Emily Hauser
Yale University
emily.hauser@yale.edu

Elaine Fantham aptly observes, in the introduction to her survey of Roman literature, that 'the author in Roman culture is usually, however regrettably, male'[2]. For those of us who are interested in female authors in antiquity – in this case, the semantics of female authorship as articulated by women writers – there are inevitable obstacles from the very start. The scarcity of female-authored works is the most obvious: in a canon that contains 3,200 entries in the Greek corpus alone, we have the names of only about a hundred female writers – and of the texts written by women

that do survive (fifty-five in total), only twenty-five are by female authors writing in Latin[3]. The number of women writing poetry in Roman antiquity is even smaller; indeed, although we have evidence of women writing and excelling in Latin poetry[4], fragments of the work of only one female classical poet, Sulpicia I, remain extant[5].

Rather than attempting to conduct an exhaustive survey of the terminology used by female authors in Latin literature to describe their own authorship, I want instead to turn to what fragmentary evidence of female poetic discourse we do have, and to take three case studies as suggestive, rather than representative, examples of the ways in which female authors thought and wrote about their authorship. My interest is in the specific, substantive terminology used by female authors within the constraints of a gendered language, in which the terminology available to them was inevitably – by the nature of the male-dominated literary culture – masculine-gendered[6]. Taking a recently identified elegiac poem of Sulpicia, a graffito written by a Pompeiian tibicina, and the verse *cento* of Proba in turn, I look at how female authors attempted to articulate their identity as women and as authors both within and at the margins of the dominant male literary tradition, and how that vocabulary responds to (and often subverts) the terminology deployed by male authors. It is important to note that I do not want to suggest that there was a uniform concept of authorship in Latin literature during the long time period covered by my three samples, from the 1st century BCE to the 4th century CE – visions of authorship in fact, as Katharina de la Durantaye has pointed out, changed and shifted over the many periods of Roman history[7] – but rather, to trace the shifting and changing of that concept as it was applied by the few extant female authors. It is also the case – given, as we will see below, the constraints imposed upon female speech / writing in the Roman world – that authorship and the act of writing poetry, for female authors, inevitably meant something different from what it meant for male poets; and that it was enacted in a different way. Seeing 'authorship' as encoded in the act of writing itself, and narrowing my focus here to

---

3 — Plant (2004), 1. The count of women authors writing in Latin is my own, based on the texts collected in Plant's anthology; note that most of these texts are short quotations from (prose) medical treatises. A list is also included in the appendix of Greene (2005), 192-196.

4 — Snyder (1991), 128.

5 — On women's writing in Latin in antiquity and beyond, see Stevenson (2005); see also Greene (2005), 158-191, Hemelrijk (1999), 146-184, Lefkowitz & Fant (2005), 8-10, Plant (2004), 101-212, Snyder (1991),122-151.

6 — I exclude self-naming (*sphragis*) in this study, as I am placing my focus on the semantics of authorship terminology and not on the authorial signature; on *sphragis* in Latin literature, see Peirano (2014), and see also Theodorakopoulos (1997) and Veremans (2006).

7 — De la Durantaye (2007), 39.

the specific, nominal self-reference *as* an author *within* the act of writing[8], I will trace female authorship, not only in so-called 'literary' texts, but across different written media and genres by women, from an epitaphic inscription to a Pompeiian graffito, from imperial Rome to late antiquity, and from elegiac couplets to a hexametrical verse *cento*.

The shifts in the visualization of authorship are perhaps most visible in the changes in the terminology deployed by male authors, and provide a good starting point from which to put female poetic authorship terminology into context. The prevailing term for 'poet / author' in the archaic period was *vates*, as Varro points out: *antiqui poetas vates appellabant* ('the ancients called poets *vates* [bards]')[9]. The second century BCE poet Ennius designated his predecessors as *vates*: *scripsere alii rem / versubus quos olim... vatesque canebant* ('others have written of the matter / in verses, which once... the bards used to sing')[10], whilst he termed himself a *poeta*, using a 'fashionable Greek loan word' (from Greek ποιητής) to emphasize his Greek literary heritage[11]. Later, at the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Augustan period, the term *poeta* went out of fashion, to be replaced by the consciously archaizing *vates* again[12]. Most of the discussions of authorship terminology in Latin literature have focused in on the use of the term *vates* in the Augustan poets, suggesting, to some scholars, its 'poetological significance' as 'not merely a synonym for *poeta*; instead, it designates the poet who is divinely inspired, prophetically intuitive, and a proclaimer of the highest truth'[13]. Others emphasize the connection of the *vates* to the divine status of *divus Augustus*, implying a parallel for the channel of communication from gods to mortals via a prophet and the dissemination of Augustus' message to the people through the poets[14]. Still others see it as a by-word for the aesthetics and

---

8 — See Hauser (2016), 2.

9 — Varro *Ling.* 7.36; see Fantham (2013), 107, Tiedemann (2007) and Wiseman (2015), 63-66. On the history of the term *vates* in general, see Dahlmann (1948) and Runes (1926), and for its etymology see Watkins (1995), 118; for the standard survey of its usage in the Augustan poets, see Newman (1967).

10 — Ennius fr. 221 Vahl.2.

11 — Fantham (2013), 9, 107, Skutsch (1985), 144, Wiseman (2015), 66-68.

12 — For the replacement of *poeta* with *vates* in the Augustan period, see Casa (1995): 'nei poeti augustei, se si esclude Orazio, molto raramente leggiamo il termine *poeta*' (51). (Horace is an exception to the rule, though, as Della Casa argues, it seems that for Horace *poeta* describes the instructional function of the poet, whereas *vates* is used to denote his vision of the sacerdotal role). See also Dahlmann (1948), 352 on Virgil's use of *vates* and *poeta*: 'in beiden [Eklogen] stellt Virgil *vates*... über *poeta*, um so in der Verbindung mit dem alten bisher allein üblichen Dichternamen *poeta* die neue Benennung zu klären'.

13 — Tiedemann (2007).

14 — Della Casa (1995); for a more nuanced view, see White (2013), 110-155.

programme of Augustan poetry as a whole, 'Alexandrian technique in the service of national, civic poetry'[15].

After the Augustan period, the term *vates* once again declined. Its successor, in the first and second centuries CE, was a term which had initially been confined to ownership and legal / political agency[16], but which later – in ways which are not entirely clear[17] – came to be transferred to describing the role of the creator, writer, and author: *auctor*. As Fantham puts it, *auctoritas*, which 'had once meant the status that guaranteed the validity of a command... came to cover the status of a writer conferring validity on facts... Canonical writers became *auctores*'[18]. Robert Kaster gives an interesting slant on the connotations of the term, with its implied emphasis on the author's believability and status as a guarantor of fact, by tracing the phrase *idoneus auctor* in the grammarians (which became particularly common in the 2nd century CE) to suggest a competitive vision of authorship in which authors vied for 'authority' on a certain term / text / theme[19].

This brief survey noticeably omits any female-gender-marked vocabulary for authorship: but such terms did, in fact, exist. The most common by far is the noun *poetria*, a Latinized version of the Greek ποιήτρια (which, in turn, was a feminized version of ποιητής, the Greek equivalent of Latin *poeta*). *poetria* is used sparingly in the late Republic and early Empire, occurring once in Cicero and once in Ovid (as well as in a contested reading in Persius); it is never used in the later imperial period, but makes a renaissance in late antiquity, where it makes another five appearances[20]. Interestingly, however, the term is never used by a female poet writing in Latin, only by men talking about female poets, and most often about ancient Greek female poets at that (most likely because of its Greek etymology, as well as the relative abundance of Greek female poets compared to Roman). *poetris* occurs only once in the contested thirteenth line of Persius' *Prologue*, as an alternative to *poetria*. Non-gender-marked nouns applied to female poets included *poeta*, which is used only once and in a generic plural by Eusebius (*Sappho et Alcaeus poetae clari habentur* ['Sappho and Alcaeus are thought to be famous poets'], *Chron*. 45.1), and

---

15 — Newman (1967), 12.

16 — Hinojo (1978), Pariente (1964), 235f.

17 — Pariente (1964) gives a good outline of the debate around the etymology of *auctoritas* and the fluctuations in its meaning over time. He suggests – which I do not find entirely convincing, and in counterpoint to Ernout-Meillet's argument for the connection between *auctoritas* and *augeo* – that the later meaning of *auctor* as 'author' should be seen as the development of an association between *auctoritas* in its primary meaning as a seller, bringing a product to the public, and the dissemination of the author's work (235).

18 — Fantham (2013), 140; see OLD s.v. *auctor*.

19 — Kaster (1978).

20 — Collected via a search of the TLL online; last accessed 4th May 2016.

vates. *vates* is used of women most commonly in the Augustan period, most often of prophetesses (the Sibyl and Cassandra in Virgil's *Aeneid*), probably because it blurred the identity of the female priestess and oracle with the poet (as, for example, in its application to the Sibyl in *Aeneid* 6.65 and 211); a particularly interesting example of the subliminal connection between women's prophetic powers and their writing is provided at *Aeneid* 6.65, where a direct link is forged between the Sibyl's prophetic speech and her writing (*tuque, o sanctissima vates, / ... foliis tantum ne carmina manda, / ne turbata volent rapidis ludibria ventis; / ipsa canas oro* ['you, most sacred prophetess... only do not entrust your verses to the leaves, so they do not whirl and fly away, playthings of the swift winds; but sing, I beg you'], *Aen.* 6.65, 74-76). Picking up on this, perhaps, *vates* is once used to refer directly to a female poet, by Ovid: addressing Perilla, a female poet, he says, *sola tuum vates Lesbia vincit opus* ('only the poetess [*vates*] of Lesbos [i.e. Sappho] surpasses your work', *Tristia* 3.7.20).

In this context, then – where the semantics of authorship terminology was as fluid as the concept of authorship itself, and where female poets could identify themselves with terms both gender-marked and non-gender-marked – what did women poets like Sulpicia call themselves? Rather than attempting to uncover a systematic vocabulary of female authorial self-labelling, I am interested here in listening in to the discourse surrounding gender, authorship and authorial identity, by examining, in the few extant fragments, the terms which women themselves used to describe their authorship. Did they make use of specifically gender-marked vocabulary like *poetria* in order to mark themselves out as women who wrote? Did they elide their gender with gender-neutral nouns like *vates*? Or did they – as I will try to suggest – avoid the confines of traditional terminology altogether, and attempt to come up with a new vocabulary, one which subverted and rewrote the discourse around authorship and gender, to create a vocabulary all their own?

I am particularly interested here in strategies of women's writing that respond to assumed norms of female speech (often as assumed / imposed by male-authored literature / society). My aim is to uncover the ways in which women writers in antiquity engaged in a form of 'coded speech' (as outlined by Susan Sniader Lanser) which, on the surface, conforms to notions of expected female roles, but which 'becomes a powerfully subversive mask for telling secrets to a woman under the watchful eyes of a man... it deliberately adopts a "feminine" position that is exaggerated into subversion by exposing the mechanisms of its own abjection'[21]. This is not a function of an absolute understanding of 'female speech'[22],

---

21 — Lanser (1992), 11; see also Hauser (2016), 18f.

22 — This view, still current in scholarship, stems from Hélène Cixous' work on *écriture fémi-*

but rather an acknowledgement of the restrictions imposed *upon* female speech (literal and figurative) in the ancient world, and the ways in which female writers both wrote within those constraints and, on another level, through a subtly coded subtext, subverted them. As we have seen, female authorship was even rarer in Rome than in Greece, and examples of expectations of female silence and conformity in speech abound, as Mary Beard points out, 'from Ovid's story in his Metamorphoses about the rape victim Philomela having her tongue cut out to prevent her naming her rapist ... to the abuse of one Roman woman who did get up to speak in the forum as a "barking" (that is, non-human) androgyne'[23]. Perhaps most famously, Plutarch, in his *Coniugalia Praecepta* or 'Advice to the Bride and Groom', defines the limits of female speech thus: δεῖ δὲ μὴ... τὸν λόγον δημόσιον εἶναι τῆς σώφρονος ('a modest woman should not allow her speech to be public', Plut. *Coniug. Praec.* 142c-d). He continues[24]:

> τὴν Ἠλείων ὁ Φειδίας Ἀφροδίτην ἐποίησε χελώνην πατοῦσαν, οἰκουρίας σύμβολον ταῖς γυναιξὶ καὶ σιωπῆς. δεῖ γὰρ ἢ πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα λαλεῖν ἢ διὰ τοῦ ἀνδρός, μὴ δυσχεραίνουσαν εἰ δι᾽ ἀλλοτρίας γλώσσης ὥσπερ αὐλητὴς φθέγγεται σεμνότερον
>
> (Plut. *Coniug. Praec.* 142d).

> Pheidias made the Elean Aphrodite with one foot upon a tortoise, as a symbol for women of their keeping silent and staying at home. For a woman should talk either to her husband or through him, and she should not be angry if, like a flute-player, she sounds better through another's tongue.

In the light of cultural expectations of female silencing in Rome, therefore, I focus on the ways in which female poets writing in Latin responded to the assumptions around expected norms of female speech, 'coding' their texts (to borrow Lanser's term) to conform on the surface, whilst at the same time burying a hidden discourse around their identity as women and authors beneath the surface level of the text.

Sulpicia **lectrix**

Sulpicia, often referred to as Sulpicia I to differentiate her from Sulpicia II (another female poet, who wrote under Domitian), lived

---

nine; see Cixous (1976), 888. For a summary of the debate over the existence of 'feminine' types of language, see Gilbert & Gubar (1985), Lanser (1992), 3-24, Moi (1985).

23 — Beard (2014a); see also Beard (2014b). See further on women's silencing in ancient Rome, Finley (2002), Habinek (2001), 122-136, Lefkowitz & Fant (2005), 29-37, Richlin (2014), esp. 2.

24 — Plut. *Coniug. Praec.* 142d.

during the period of Augustus' rule, and is the only female author of Latin elegy whose work has survived. Her poems were preserved within the third book of the *Corpus Tibullianum*, of which only the first two books are thought to have been written by Tibullus himself[25]. Six poems within the third book (3.13-18) are generally (though not always) regarded as written by Sulpicia herself, whilst a further five (3.8-12) which mention Sulpicia were, from the nineteenth century on, attributed to a different author and termed the 'Garland of Sulpicia'[26]. Recently, scholars have tended to attribute at least some, or all, of the 'Garland' to Sulpicia herself. Holt Parker, in particular, has argued for the restitution of 3.9 and 3.11 to Sulpicia's authorship; while Judith Hallett, in her provocatively titled chapter 'The Eleven Elegies of the Augustan Poet Sulpicia', argues that 'there is every indication that [Sulpicia] is the author of these eleven poems'[27]. At the same time, other scholars have denied Sulpicia authorship of any of the poems in the Tibullan corpus[28].

Following Hallett in seeing all eleven poems associated with Sulpicia as authored by her, and seeing Sulpicia as a distinct, female poet, I want to focus here on the epitaph of the slave-girl Petale[29]. This poem, written in elegiac couplets, was first identified as being of Sulpician authorship by Jérôme Carcopino in 1929, and has since come to be generally regarded as an authentic Sulpician poem[30]. It commemorates a slave-girl, Petale (a

---

25 — Note that editors alternately divide the Tibullan corpus into three of four books; here I will be following the more common three-book division. For a good survey of recent critical trends in the study of Sulpicia, see Keith (2006). For introductions to Sulpicia's work, see Bradley (1995), Snyder (1991), 128-136. Important articles on Sulpicia include Hallett (2002), Hinds (1987), Holzberg (1998), Hubbard (2004), Keith (1997), Lowe (1988), and Santirocco (1979); see also the chapters in Greene (2005), Flaschenriem (2005) and Merriam (2005).

26 — For a good summary of the debate around Sulpicia's authorship, see Skoie (2013), 85.

27 — Parker (1994), Hallett (2002), 46 ; see contra Plant (2004), 111 n. 10.

28 — Habinek (2001), 122-136, Holzberg (1998), Hubbard (2004). See contra Keith (2006), 5-10, whose arguments I find persuasive; see in particular p. 7, 'by suppressing the evidence of Roman women's literary production... Habinek rehearses the very strategies of exclusion and silencing of women that he identifies in Roman literary culture'.

29 — For the text, see the relevant entry in L'Année Épigraphique, Cagnat & Besnier (1929), 20 n. 73.

30 — I follow in particular here Stevenson (2005), who argues convincingly for Sulpicia's authorship of the poem. I quote the central part of her argument below: 'A number of linguistic features suggest that the Sulpicia who is the probable subject of this poem is connected with the Sulpicia who is author of the Cerinthus poems. The adverb *longinquom* ("a long while") is found in writers of the Republic, but falls out of use in Augustan poetry. *Quoi* for *cui* is also an archaic feature. The masculine form *ipse colus* is used by Catullus and Propertius, whereas other classical writers treat the word as feminine. The usage is thus peculiar to the first generation of elegiac poets, among whom the poet Sulpicia is numbered. Insofar as it is possible to read any kind of poetic signature off such a tiny oeuvre, the epitaph is Sulpician. The ambiguities about naming in the two first lines suggest the same love of paradox as the use of *fama* in 3. 13' Stevenson (2005), 43. Hallett (2009), 188 n. 25 provides another persuasive argument for Sulpicia's authorship: 'One learned literary touch, observed by both Carcopino and Stevenson, is the masculine form *ipse colus*, used only by Catullus and Propertius. Another is an allusion to an epigram in the Greek Anthology (*Anth. Pal.* 7.12.4), which

Greek name, which, as Stevenson points out, fits with the predominance of highly skilled Greek slaves in late republican Rome), who used to be a *lectrix* or 'reader' and who has since passed away. Here is the text as printed in Stevenson[31]:

> Sulpiciae cineres lectricis cerne viator
>   quoi servile datum nomen erat Petale.
> Ter denos numero quattuor plus vixerat annos
>   natumque in terris Aglaon ediderat.
> Omnia naturae bona viderat arte vigebat   5
>   splendebat forma, creverat ingenio.
> Invida fors vita longinquom degere tempus
>   noluit hanc fatis defuit ipse colus
>
> (*L'Année Épigraphique* 1928.73).

> Passer-by. Observe the ashes of Sulpicia the *lectrix* / the *lectrix* of Sulpicia,
>   to whom the slave-name 'Petale' had been given.
> She had lived thrice ten years plus four,
>   and on earth, she had brought forth a son, Aglaos ('glorious');
> She had seen all the good things of nature, and was strong in artistry;
>   she was splendid in beauty, and had grown [mature] in intellect.
> Envious Fortune was unwilling that she should spend a long time in life:
>   the Fates' distaff itself failed them
>
> (tr. Stevenson)[32].

At first glance this might seem a standard epitaph for a valued slave: it begins with the slave's freed name (Sulpicia), her role (a *lectrix* or slave who read aloud to her master / mistress), and her slave name (Petale), suggesting, as Stevenson points out, with the emphasis placed on her

---

represents the Hellenistic female poet Erinna as sent to Hades by the Moira (fate), the "mistress of the distaff", and draws on metaphoric connections between weaving by Fates and mortal women and poetry. These connections provide a thread, as it were, between the portrayals of Sulpicia as "reader" and "writer" in the first and last lines of the epigram, respectively. As Marilyn Skinner has observed (pers. comm.), the mention of the distaff in line 8 is an honorific tribute to Erinna, and therefore evidence that the author considers herself to be writing within a female poetic tradition; so, too, in this poem does Sulpicia cast herself as Erinna, and the dead Petale as Erinna's beloved companion, Baucis, an amazing tribute to a freedwoman. In my view, the complexity, tightness and multiplicity of reference in the opening phrase *Sulpiciae cineres lectricis* (analyzed below) conforms particularly well to Nick Lowe's identification of Sulpicia's 'conscious, almost obsessive articulation of form' (Lowe [1988], 199). Dickison & Hallett (2014), in their recent edited volume of women's writing in Latin, follow Stevenson in attributing the epitaph to Sulpicia (Dickison & Hallett [2014], 123); see also Hallett (2010), 368.

31 — Stevenson (2005), 43. Dickison and Hallett similarly follow Stevenson's text: (Dickison & Hallett [2014], 24, see also 2); see also Hallett (2009), 187 and Hallett (2010), 367f. For the inscription, see *AE* (1928), 73f. and Carcopino (1929).

32 — Stevenson (2005), 43.

servile... nomen ('slave name') that she was manumitted by her mistress on her deathbed; it then goes on to mention her age, her children, and her achievements. On the surface, Sulpicia is performing and conforming to the appropriate female role of the bereaved mistress, who is piously commemorating her deceased slave; she is conforming to the expectations of the genre of elegy and its origins in lament and mourning[33]; and she is also, as multiple studies of female speech in both ancient Greece and Rome have shown, affiliating herself with a particularly female speech genre, that of lament[34]. Although female lament in Rome has been less studied than in Greek culture and literature, Dorota Dutsch has made a compelling argument for the centrality of women in ancient Roman lament practices, both in their role as *praeficae* (hired mourners) and in conducting the *nenia*, a funerary lament sung by women and accompanied by pipe music[35]. Sulpicia's elegy, then, on the surface, is utterly as one would expect that of a Roman woman to be: appropriate to both her status, her genre, and the expectations and limits set around female speech.

But there is another level to this apparently formulaic epitaph: one which shows the author, Sulpicia, in fact reflecting on, and attempting to define, her own authorship in the subtext, coded beneath the conformist female speech of the surface text. In an environment in which female authorship was a relatively rare occurrence, and a culture in which female speech was actively discouraged, I want to suggest that Sulpicia found other ways and other outlets in which to reflect on her authorship: in this case, through an epitaph for a slave which, on one level, conforms to expected female decorum / lament, and on the other, beneath the surface, provides a unique glimpse into Sulpicia's understanding and exploration of her identity as a female author. The imperative *cerne* ('see') in the opening line thus becomes more than a simple stock exhortation to the traveller to stop and look at the epitaphic inscription[36]: it also becomes an invitation to the reader to *discern* the multiple layers and meanings that lie beneath the surface – a direct provocation that asks the reader to see beyond the coded language and 'subversive mask' assumed by the female author[37].

---

33 — See, in particular, Nagy (2010); see also Weisman (2010), 1-12.

34 — Dutsch (2008) provides a useful overview of the cultural history of female lament in ancient Rome, which has been largely underrepresented in the literature compared to studies of Greek female lament. On lament in the ancient world generally, see Holst-Warhaft (1992), Suter (2008); on lament as an 'art of women', see Holst-Warhaft (1992), 1.

35 — Dutsch (2008).

36 — See n. 55 below.

37 — The sense 'distinguish, separate, discern' is central to the verb *cernere* (from which English *discern*); see TLL s.v. *cerno* I, '*i. q. secernere, discernere*'.

To separate these multiple layers, we need to begin with the first word of the poem. There is an instant ambiguity in the double genitive *Sulpiciae cineres lectricis*, allowing for two possible readings: either 'the ashes of Sulpicia the *lectrix*' (where *lectricis* is read in apposition with *Sulpiciae*), or 'the ashes of the *lectrix* of Sulpicia' (where *Sulpiciae* is read as a possessive genitive in relation to *lectricis*). This elision of the double identities of the author and the slave is further complicated by naming practices in ancient Rome, whereby a manumitted slave normally assumed the *nomen* of their master, along with the individual name added as a form of *cognomen*[38]. In this case, the slave of Sulpicia would, upon receiving her freedom, have been called Sulpicia herself; and the opening lines of the poem identifying the '*lectrix* of Sulpicia whose slave name was Petale' would provide a very accurate description of a slave initially called Petale, later freed by Sulpicia, to be finally known as Sulpicia Petale[39]. But this is more than simply a reflection on manumission practices, or, perhaps, 'a gesture of affection towards a slave who may have been very much a companion, or an ironic recognition of the contingent status of even a daughter of the elite'[40]. It is, rather, a very conscious elision of the identities of author and slave, so that, on the one hand, the epitaph can be read as a dedication to someone else; and, on the other, it can be read as *a memorialization of the poet's own fame* – a process of literal self-inscription onto the epitaphic monument, whereby the female poet announces her name, her authorship, and her poetic production to the world.

And read in this way, a whole new layer of meaning opens up beneath the surface of the elegy. The opening word *Sulpiciae* not only plays into epitaphic conventions, where the person commemorated is usually mentioned at the opening: it also alludes to the conventions of poetic *sphragis* or signature, whereby the poet 'signs off' their poems with their own name[41]. These are not just the ashes of Sulpicia the *lectrix*, or the *lectrix* of Sulpicia, or Sulpicia the *lectrix* of Sulpicia – this is also the *poem* of Sulpicia. The possessive genitive thus takes on a wider semantic range, through its associations with the signature of the poet. That Sulpicia is punning on her own name here is particularly likely, given that this is the same author who in 3.16 puns on her name as *servi / Servi filia Sulpicia* ('Sulpicia, daughter of Servius / a slave,' line 4) – another sphragistic

---

38 — Johnston (1905), 47.

39 — There is also a possible Propertian intertext here (although, given Dickison and Hallett's dating of the Sulpician epitaph to c. 20 BCE, Propertius may well be referring back to Sulpicia), as Propertius also uses the name Petale for a female slave of Cynthia at 4.7.43 (written c. 16 BCE); see Hallett (2009), 188 n. 25.

40 — Stevenson (2005), 44.

41 — See n.6 above. For this interpretation, see Hallett (2009), 188 n. 27.

epigram in which the author plays verbal games (of a different kind) with her identity and social status[42].

The second locus of multiple meaning, and the word I am especially interested in, is the noun *lectrix*. The noun, a feminine form of the masculine *lector*, occurs only three times in Latin literature outside the grammarians, and each time is used to describe a professional female slave whose task it was to read aloud to her master or mistress[43]. The same is true of the masculine noun *lector*, which is used, as the TLL notes, 'as almost a technical term for those who practice the art of recitation (mostly slaves and freedmen)'[44]. Yet if we take a closer look at the masculine *lector* (which is inevitably far more common, given the fact that a) the grammatical generic masculine is used to describe the anonymous / generalized reader in Latin[45]; and b) male authors and male readers are both more common and more visible in the literary record), we can see that the noun carries a much wider semantic range. Often, it is used to refer to someone who reads to him or herself (the audience of the text, often addressed explicitly as *lector* by the author). But it can also, in an important usage by Ovid, be used to denote *the poet himself*, as a reader of his own work to an audience (as in a recitation, 'a strong venue for poets to reach a public in Augustan Rome')[46]: *carmina lector / commendet dulci qualiacumque sono* ('the reader can procure favour for songs of any kind of quality, when they are sung with a sweet voice', *Ars* 2.283f.)[47].

This double meaning arises from an important and often-discussed element of Roman reading practice: reading aloud. The debate around Roman reading practices has focused in recent years on the question of whether the Romans read aloud or silently, and if they were indeed capable of silent reading at all. William Johnson, summarizing the terms

---

42 — On which see Hinds (1987), 44-45.

43 — CIL VI 8786 *Cnide lectrix* ('Cnide the female slave who read aloud'); CIL VI 33473 *Derceto Aureliae virginis (Vestalis?) lectrix* ('Derceto, the female slave who read aloud, belonging to Aurelia the [Vestal?] virgin'); inscr. RevA. V 28, 1928 p. 371 n. 73, 1 *Sulpiciae cineres lectricis* ('the ashes of Sulpicia, the female slave who read aloud').; see TLL s.v. *lector* II.

44 — See TLL s.v. *lector* I.B.1.a; by way of an example, see CIL VI 3978, *Panaenus Liviae lector* ('Panaenus, the *lector* of Livia').

45 — On the generic masculine, see Hellinger & Bussmann (2001), 7. Examples of the generic masculine in use for the anonymous / generalized reader include, inter alia, Cic. *Opt. Gen.* 14 *non... ea verba me annumerare lectori putavi oportere, sed tamquam appendere* ('I did not think I owed it to the reader to have regard for the number of words, but rather, for thier weight'), Hor. *Ars Poetica* 344, *lectorem delectando pariterque monendo* ('by delighting and, at the same time, teaching the reader'); see further TLL s.v. *lector* I.A.

46 — Lowrie (2009), 251. See also Fantham (2013), 7-8, Horsfall (2003), 55-57, Wiseman (1982).

47 — Note that the *Ars Amatoria* was published later than the date suggested by Dickison and Hallett for the Sulpician text (ca. 20 BCE) (as also Hallett [2009], 188 n. 25); I do not want to suggest that this is a direct intertext, as much as demonstrating that *lector* / *lectrix* maintained a semantic ambiguity between poet / reader in classical Latin.

of the debate in his recent book, concludes persuasively 'that the ancients did read silently, yet... also... that they commonly read aloud'; that there would have been an important place for slave *lectores* within Roman literary / scholarly culture; and that increased efficiency for the Romans did not always mean silent reading[48]. A Roman who wished to read, then, would either have read aloud or silently to themselves (as Bernard Knox points out, silent reading was probably employed by scholars who needed to read large quantities of text at speed)[49]; s / he would then have termed him / herself a *lector / lectrix* – as indeed the poets do, in addressing the anticipated reader or audience of their poetry[50]. On the other hand, if our hypothetical Roman did not wish to read themselves (or indeed enjoyed being read to), or wanted to read while travelling, they would have employed a *lector / lectrix* (a slave to read aloud to them). And finally, a Roman poet, in a culture in which it was common for the poet to recite his / her poems aloud to an audience of 'literati... who would listen to works of prose or verse at dinner gatherings'[51], would have called him / herself in this specific context either a *recitator* (the more common word) or (as attested in Ovid) a *lector / lectrix*[52]. Thus *the same term* could theoretically be used to denote both a reader who read for personal pleasure and profit; a slave ordered to read aloud; and a poet who recited his / her work.

---

48 — Johnson (2010), 9-14. On reading practices in Rome, see, in particular, the introduction to Johnson (2010), 1-16; on the role of the *lector*, see Starr (1991). For the debate around reading aloud, see Balogh (1927), Gavrilov (1997), Knox (1968), and the bibliography at Starr (1991), 337 n. 3.

49 — Knox (1968), 421f.

50 — There are multiple examples of this usage which I have collected via a search of the TLL; salient examples of Republican and Augustan poets, in particular (i.e. those with whom Sulpicia might have been familiar) addressing or anticipating the presence of the *lector* are listed below. Catull. 14.25 *si qui forte mearum ineptiarum lectores eritis* ('if you will ever happen to be readers of my trifling attempts'); Hor. *Sat.* 1.10.74 *contentus paucis lectoribus* ('content with a few readers'); Hor. *Epist.* 1.19.35 *mea cur ingratus opuscula lector laudet ametque domi* ('why ungrateful readers praise and love my works at home'), 2.1.214 *[poetae], qui se lectori credere malunt quam spectatoris fastidia ferre* ('[poets] who prefer to trust themselves to the reader than to bear the disdain of the spectator'); Ov. *Tr.* 1.11.35 *candide lector* ('honest reader'), 3.1.2 *lector amice* ('reader, my friend'). See further TLL s.v. *lector* I.A; see also n. 52 below.

51 — Fantham (2013), 7f. See n. 46 above.

52 — The more common term for the poet who recites his poems is *recitator*: see, for example, Hor. *Ars* 474, where *recitator* is used as a synonym for *poeta: indoctum doctumque fugat recitator acerbus* ('the bitter reciter chases away the unlearned and learned alike'). For a later post-Augustan example, see Plin. *Ep.* 1.13.2, *plerique in stationibus sedent tempusque audiendi fabulis conterunt, ac subinde sibi nuntiari iubent, an iam recitator intraverit* ('most [of the audience] sit in public places and waste time with gossip when they could be paying attention, and order that they're to be told from time to time if the reciter has come in'); see also Sen. *Ep.* 95.2, though here *recitator* is used to refer to a philosopher rather than a poet. See further Allen (1972), 7 n. 19 on the usage of *recitare* as a synonym for *legere*, and Paoli (1922).

At the heart of the noun *lector* / *lectrix*, then, is a fundamental, and very unusual, combination of the various different mechanisms and levels of literary production in ancient Rome. It can be used to describe both the audience, on the one hand, and the poet, on the other; the silent reader (audience), the slave reader, and the reader who speaks the words aloud (performer / poet). And this flexibility of the term allows Sulpicia's elegy to operate on many levels in its exploration of the semantics of female authorship. On one level, we have the overt meaning (double genitive aside) of the opening phrase: 'the slave-girl-who-read-aloud to Sulpicia (who was also called Sulpicia)'. At the same time, the mention of the *lectrix* hints at the expectation of an audience of readers for Sulpicia's poetry – perhaps even, with the feminine version of *lector* here, a specifically *female* audience of women 'readers' (*lectrices*) of Sulpicia[53]. And finally and most importantly, on a third level, the elision of Sulpicia Petale with Sulpicia the author via the doubling of their names and the double genitive of the opening suggests that Sulpicia, herself, could be seen as a *lectrix* – someone who, like Ovid, reads aloud her poetry to her audience; who is, herself, *Sulpicia lectrix*.

It is the very opacity and complexity of the opening phrase, *Sulpiciae... lectricis*, with its fusion of the two Sulpicias, combined with the multiple meanings of the term *lector* / *lectrix*, which allows for this subtle intertwining and identification between mistress and slave, poet and reader, and which enables Sulpicia to think about herself through the framework of the *lectrix*. There are many reasons, I think, why Sulpicia would have chosen to associate herself on a subliminal level with the term *lectrix* as a description of her authorship, and why it is peculiarly appropriate to her project. First and foremost, it is an overtly female noun, with the feminine ending *-trix* typical of feminized *-tor* nouns, thus emphasizing Sulpicia's gendered identity as a woman author and creating a vocabulary for her authorship that is at once generalizing in its capacity to survey the spectrum of female experiences from mistress to slave, from poet to audience, and, at the same time, very specific. *lectrix*, as we have noted above, occurs only in the sense of 'female slave who reads aloud' in Latin literature and inscriptions; Sulpicia's deployment of the subtextual resonance of reader / author / reciter makes it a unique term for her own understanding of her specific identity as an author. Moreover, it provides important insights into both her poetic process – a reader of other poetic

---

53 — I am grateful to Kristina Milnor for pointing out to me (pers. comm.) that the term *lectrix* here in fact allows for even more flexibility in terms of the attribution of the epitaph's authorship: even if Sulpicia I were not the author of the text (on which see 30n. above), the flexibility of *lectrix* allows us to posit a reader / imitator of Sulpicia here (a *lectrix* of Sulpicia's earlier poetry and a poet in her own right).

works[54]; a creator and reciter of her own – and her understanding of her audience, hinting at a direct relationship with the reader (*lector / lectrix*) of the epitaph itself, and summoning up an intimately linked female community of author and reader. The poetic conceit of the direct address to the passer-by (*cerne viator* ['see, passer-by'], line 1), a frequent trope of epitaphic inscriptions[55], creates the artifice of a voice speaking to the traveller (a conceit which would have been further strengthened by the common practice of reading aloud)[56] – thus serving both to demonstrate, and to elide, the link between Sulpicia, the *lectrix* who read her poetry to her audience, and the *lector / -trix / viator / -trix* who reads aloud the inscribed lines to him / herself.

The emerging poetic vocabulary visible in Sulpicia's complex exploration and skilful manipulation of the term *lectrix* is reinforced throughout the rest of the poem by a stream of metapoetic resonances[57]. The overt meaning of the text, the elegiac lament for a slave, turns through the subtle identification of slave and mistress, reader and poet into a programmatic statement of Sulpicia's poetics. I want to focus here on the fourth line in particular, *natumque in terris Aglaon ediderat* (in Stevenson's translation, 'and on earth, she had brought forth a son, Aglaos ["glorious"]')[58]. The first reason this phrase in particular draws the eye is the use of the verb *ēdo* to denote giving birth, which, when applied to human births, is a primarily poetic usage[59]. In this sense, Sulpicia draws attention to her knowledge of the conventions of poetry and poetic language, at the same time as laying claim to poetic status through a display of her literary pedigree. But *ēdo* is also, significantly, the most common word in Latin to describe *the process of publishing literary works*[60]. Cicero, in the *De Natura Deorum*, uses *ēdo* specifically to discuss the publication of his books: *libris nostris, quos compluris brevi tempore edidimus* ('my books, of which there are many and which I published within a short time', *Nat. Deor.* 1.6); Catullus, similarly, describes the publication of his friend Cinna's poem using the same verb (*Zmyrna mei Cinnae nonam post... messem quam coepta est..., edita* ['my dear Cinna's *Smyrna* has been published, nine harvests after

---

54 — See Hallett (2010), 368 on *lectrix*: 'it could even refer to "the ashes commemorated by the mistress Sulpicia, herself a reader", which the literarily learned Sulpicia certainly was'.

55 — See Lattimore (1962), 230-237 for the trope of the epitaph speaking to the passer-by.

56 — See 48n. above.

57 — Hallett (2009), 188 n. 27 notes specific intertextual references within the text to Catullus and Propertius (in the masculine form *ipse colus*), and an epigram in the Greek Anthology which imagines the Hellenistic female poet Erinna sent to Hades by the Fates; as well as a connection between the mention of the distaff and Erinna's *Distaff*, thus demonstrating 'that the author considers herself to be writing within a female poetic tradition'.

58 — On Aglaos as a bilingual pun on the Latin *splendebat*, see Hallett (2010), 367 n. 36.

59 — TLL s.v. *ēdo*, I.A.1.a.*a*.

60 — For more examples, see TLL s.v. *ēdo*, I.C.

OPTIMA TU PROPRII NOMINIS AUCTOR   165

it was begun', *Carm.* 95.1f.]). The unusual use of *ēdo* in the context of
birth, combined with its presence alongside the metaliterary resonances
of the opening line, suggests an alternative reading of 'published' here,
tying into the subtext of Sulpicia's authorship and the specificity within
the noun *lectrix* placed upon mechanisms of poetic production and audi-
ence engagement[61]. (We might compare Kristina Milnor's observation of
a similar metaliterary pun upon the word *componere* in [Tibullus] 3.13
line 10, as both literary composition and social performance)[62]. Not only
that, but there is a very specific interaction between the verb, *ediderat*,
and its object, *Aglaon*. On the surface of the text, Aglaos is, of course,
the name of Petale's child and a common enough Greek name (Roman
slaves were frequently given Greek names; often these names denoted the
actual nationality of the slave)[63]. But the name, as Stevenson notes in her
translation, also carries its own meaning, as an adjective in Greek mean-
ing 'glorious' (ἀγλαός)[64]. The phrase ἀγλαὰ τέκνα ('glorious children')
is, in fact, a formula in archaic Greek poetry[65], suggesting once again, in
the use of the name Aglaos in the context of birth and his status as Petale's
child, a knowing intertextuality on Sulpicia's part.

   Combined with the literary resonance inherent in *ediderat*, the adjec-
tive ἀγλαόν provides a reminder of the Greek elegiac poet Theognis'
description of poetry, as the ἀγλαὰ Μουσάων δῶρα ('glorious gifts of
the Muses', *El.* 1.250). This is not the only association of the adjective
ἀγλαός with poetry in antiquity: in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* we
have the ἀγλαὸς οἶμος ἀοιδῆς ('glorious path of song', *Hom. Hymn in
Merc.* 451). And the masculine accusative case in Greek as we see it here,
Aglaon / ἀγλαόν, also allows for another grammatically correct reading,
as a *neuter* singular substantive ('a glorious [thing]') – meaning that the
line can thus be read as both, 'gave birth to Aglaos', and 'published a
glorious poem'. In the conflation between glory and poetry (*Aglaon* /
ἀγλαὰ δῶρα), glorious children (ἀγλαὰ τέκνα), and the close assocation
between giving birth and publication (*ediderat*), then, Sulpicia weaves
a deep and binding link between Sulpicia Petale as a mother of Aglaos,

---

61 — Compare a similar pun upon the verb *ēdo* in Petronius *Sat.* 118.3, *neque concipere aut
edere partum mens potest* ('the mind cannot conceive or bring forth / publish its baby born').

62 — Milnor (2002), 275f. Milnor's discussion of Sulpicia's use of metaphors around the
female body to describe the publication of her poetry in [Tibullus] 3.13 in fact provides a particularly
pertinent comparison for the birth metaphors in this epitaph: see Milnor (2002), 260f., especially
261: 'it is the poet's own body that becomes the site of her texts... Instead of being invited to look
with the poet *at* the female body, we are invited to look *at* the poet *as* the female body'.

63 — Johnston (1905), 47.

64 — Hallett (2010), 367 n. 36 notes correctly a bilingual pun here between the name Aglaos
(which can also be translated as 'gleaming') and the Latin *splendebat* in line 6.

65 — Hom. *Il.* 2.871; 18.337; 23.23; *Od.* 11.249; 11.285; 14.223; *HAp* 14; *HAph* 127; *HDio*
2; *Hes* Theog. 366, 644.

and herself as the author of glory-bringing poetry – both of them linked together by their *ars* (*arte vigebat* ['she was strong in artistry'], line 5). This is not a tenuous link: the connection between motherhood / child-birth and authorship runs throughout Greco-Roman literature, from Plato, in his *Symposium*, who describes the works of Homer, Hesiod and τοὺς ἄλλους ποιητὰς τοὺς ἀγαθοὺς ('all the other good poets') as their ἔκγονα ('offspring', *Symp.* 209d), to Catullus, who calls his poems *dulces Musarum fetus* ('the sweet fruits / offspring of the Muses', 65.3)[66]. Ovid is even more explicit:

> Palladis exemplo de me sine matre creata
>   Carmina sunt; stirps haec progeniesque mea
>
> (Ov. *Tr.* 3.14.13f.).

> My poems were born of me, in the manner of Pallas, without a mother: these are my blood-line, my children.
>
> (tr. A. S. Kline).

Sulpicia, then, both lays claim to an age-old poetic trope of the connection between motherhood and authorship, and, at the same time, as a female poet, uses it in a vitally different way in order to define and illuminate her own identity as an author. Along the lines of Hallett's observations of Sulpicia's expression of both her 'sameness' and 'other-ness' in relation to her male contemporaries, we see Sulpicia here both building upon and identifying with male literary tropes, and at the same time, redefining them in the context of her own, 'other' female identity[67]. What it means for her, Sulpicia, to 'give birth' to a poem; the connection between her femininity and her authorship; and her relationship to the male poets of the past as well as her contemporaries like Ovid, are all deftly interwoven in a metaphorical web of association and imagery.

By the association of mother and poet, then, master and slave, author and audience, through the doubling and mirroring of the *Sulpiciae lectrices* and the ambiguity of the semantic levels of *lector / lectrix*, the epitaph is transformed from a routine farewell for a slave into a hidden, and masterful, programmatic poetic statement. In particular, the subtle

---

66 — Compare also the fragment of Antiphanes (K-A fr. 194 = Ath. 10.450e-f) where Sappho poses the riddle of the female as a written letter, carrying as her infants the letters of the alphabet; see also Petronius *Sat.* 115.4, *'sinite me' inquit 'sententiam explere; laborat carmen in fine'* ('"Allow me", he said, "to finish my thought; my poem is labouring at its end"') and n. 61 above. For a modern equivalent, see Cixous (1976), 881, 'a woman is never far from "mother"... there is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink'.

67 — Hallett (1989). See in particular p. 70: 'Sulpicia's poetry prominently combines elements which emphasize her differences from men, or at least from her fellow male elegists, with elements stressing her similarity to males: in other words..., Sulpicia depicts herself, if not all women, as both Other and Same'.

concealment of Sulpicia's identity behind the mask of the *lectrix* suggests a layered and complex vision of poetic authorship that centres around a deeply engaged relationship between poet and audience; an emphasis on female poetics and, perhaps, a female community of writers and readers (*lectrices*); and a modelling of female authorship upon the creative generativity of motherhood, that both draws upon and corrects male authorship paradigms. Hidden beneath the surface of the text, Sulpicia suggests, her identity and understanding of her authorship is available to us all to see – if only we would discern it. *cerne viator* indeed.

Tibicina nempe ego

The second example of a female author's self-identification through authorship terminology comes from a different source: a graffito written by a female flute-player (a *tibicina*), inscribed on a red-painted column in Reg. III Ins. V of Pompeii, which fell down into the street after the collapse of the second story of the house to which it belonged (CIL 4.8873)[68]. The graffito itself has been little studied and no longer survives, but I provide its transcription in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (CIL) below, as well as Della Corte's restoration of the text and my own literal translation:

          \<H\>omnes nego deos. Vinca(t), vinca(t) pantorgana Tal(?...).
          Cit(h)ar(o)edus cantat Apol(l)o. Tibicina nempe ego.
          Came(l)o(p)ardus (h)abet cor ut Achille(s) ob clar\<r\>ita(tem?).
          Sum rabid(a). Ia(m) Volcanus e(m) medicina est[69].

---

68 — On women's graffiti in Pompeii, see Woeckner (2002); for a reading of a specific graffito, with a focus on the establishment of authorship / identity by a female writer within a non-elite literary scene, see Milnor (2014), 191-232. For an excellent introduction to literary graffiti in Pompeii, see Milnor (2014), 1-43. See also, on Pompeiian graffiti generally, Baird & Taylor (2011) and Benefiel & Keegan (2016), especially Benefiel (2016).

69 — Della Corte (1955), 922 n. 8873. At Della Corte (1927), 107 the text is printed almost

(CIL 4.8873).

> I deny that all are gods. Let Tal(us) win, let him win the musical contest.
> Apollo sings as a lyre-player; *I*, of course, am a flute-player.
> The giraffe has a heart like Achilles in its wide renown.
> I am furious. Well! Now Vulcan's the cure.

The meaning of the graffito is difficult to unravel at first glance; I will suggest below a couple of adjustments to the text and several ways in which to interpret the invective force of the epigram, but for now, the main narrative runs as follows. A female flute-player, a *tibicina*, is the author of the graffito: she identifies herself in the second line (*tibicina nempe ego* ['*I*, of course, am a flute-player']). She opens with a statement of scorn and announces that a man named Talus has won (or will win) a *pantorgana*, which Elizabeth Woeckner identifies as a neologism, formed of a compound of the Greek words πᾶν ('all') and τὸ ὄργανον ('musical instrument'), and meaning 'a musical competition involving several instruments'[70]. The *tibicina* goes on to describe the musical talents of Apollo and her own status as a musician (*tibicina*); she makes an obscure comparison between a giraffe and Achilles; and she ends by stating her fury at her rival's victory, and her recourse to the god Volcanus (Vulcan) as a cure for her rage. With so many textual difficulties it is almost impossible to specify a particular metre, although it seems clear, from the iambic character of the first line and the number of pyrrhics and tribrachs in the next three, that it cannot be considered prose and should instead be read as 'reflect[ing] some sort of free-ish metrical musical rhythm': a loose and dynamic combination of rhythmical prosody that is intended to approximate verse[71].

As with any epigraphic source, we have to begin with a certain amount of hard graft in order to establish the text. This particular graffito, as Della Corte, Diehl, and more recently Antonio Varone note, is notoriously difficult to read. The author omits letters throughout the text – *Apollo*, for example, becomes *Apolo*; *citharoedus* becomes *citaredus* – and the script is

---

identically to the later edition in the CIL, though in the earlier publication he suggests *Tal(es / us)* for the ending of the first line, and incorporates *clarita(tem)*. Diehl (1930), 63 n. 831 has the same text as the CIL, although he prints a question mark after *nego* in the first line, around *abet cor* and *Achiles* in the third, and after *rabid(a)* and *ia(m)* in the fourth. Varone (2012), 204 notes the uncertainty of the reading of the third line, suggesting *cano or* at the start of the line, *cur* or *tua* for *cor, ut anillo* for *ut Axille ob*; several different suggestions are given for the line ending (*canto radius / ardus*).

70 — I follow Woeckner's suggestion here, which seems to me to be a plausible explanation of the word along the lines of Latin neologisms like *topanta*; see Woeckner (2002), 68.

71 — I am very grateful to Richard Thomas for his insights, quoted above (pers. comm.), into the prosody of the graffito, as well as Kristina Milnor for first pointing out to me its unusual metrical character.

hard to decipher, particularly in the third line. Varone notes that for *cor*
we might also read *cur* or *tua*; for *ut Axille ob*, *ut aniilo* (that is, *an(h)elo*);
as well as other uncertain readings[72]. I accept Della Corte's restorations
for the most part, following his conjecture of the supplementation of
Tal(...) as *Talus*[73]; the only case in which I dispute the accepted reading is
in the opening clause, <*h*>*omnes nego deos* (translated above as 'I deny that
all are gods')[74]. I want to suggest that the editorial excision of the initial
<*h*>, first put forward by Della Corte in 1927 and not challenged since,
has misled readers. As Veikko Väänänen shows, an *h* parasite is occasion-
ally, in Pompeiian graffiti, added to word-initial vowels in imitation of
Greek rough breathing; *homnes* as *omnes* could therefore be not a mistake,
but rather an orthographic choice[75]. But the decision not to excise the
initial *h* also has a further important ramification. In a text where, as we
saw, several letters are omitted, we could, in fact, read *homnes*, not as
an aspirated form of *omnes* – of which it would, in any case, be the sole
instance in the Pompeiian graffiti[76] – but, instead, as the plural noun
hom(i)nes, 'men / mortals'. The proposed counterfactual against which
omnes nego deos argues – 'I believe that everyone is a god' – makes far
less sense than *homines nego deos*, 'I deny that mortals are gods' (against
the counterfactual, 'mortals can be gods'), made particularly sharp with
its chiastic arrangement around the verb and the opposition between
humans and gods[77]. This opposition of mortal and immortal planes is a
key motif within the text, which mentions within four lines a male mortal
(Talus), a male god (Apollo), and a male half-mortal half-god (Achilles).
And finally (and perhaps most persuasively), in the context of the *tibici-*
na's anger at her male rival's victory, the subtle double invective force of
the noun *homines* as both 'mortal' and (occasionally) 'male'[78] ('I deny that

---

72 — See Varone (2012), 204 for full details; see also n. 69 above.

73 — Corte (1927), 107. Woeckner (2002), 70 also restores as Talus, adducing as evidence the
masculine gender of *camelopardus* and the fact that the name Talus occurs twice in the Pompeiian
corpus.

74 — Woeckner reads this clause instead as *Themis amat deos* ('Themis loves the gods')
(Woeckner [2002], 80 n. 2). However, I see little evidence for this reading in the images presented
in Della Corte (1927), 107 and Varone (2012), 204; and the fact that Varone does not correct Della
Corte's reading suggests to me that we can let *homnes nego deos* stand.

75 — Väänänen (1966), 58.

76 — Väänänen (1966), 58 a).

77 — There may also be a reference to Heraclitus DK B62 ἀθάνατοι θνητοί, θνητοὶ
ἀθάντατοι ('the gods are mortals, mortals are gods'). *Deus* and *homo* are very frequently compared /
contrasted as a nominal pair in Latin: for examples, see TLL s.v. *homo* I.A.1.a.β.   .

78 — *Homo* as equivalent to *vir* (i.e. not-woman) is rare, but attested: for an example, see
Plaut. *Cist*. 4.2.57, *mi homo et mea mulier, vos saluto* ('sir; madam; greetings'), and see further TLL
s.v. *homo* I.B. Interestingly, the TLL notes that the use of *homo* as *vir* is often confined to women's
speech: see TLL s.v. *homo* 3.a.β.

mortals / men are gods'), provides a particularly barbed, if veiled, insult at the male performer Talus.

The emended Latin text, along with an altered translation (its interpretation will be discussed below), would therefore read:

> Hom(i)nes nego deos. Vinca(t), vinca(t) pantorgana Tal(us).
> Cit(h)ar(o)edus cantat Apol(l)o. Tibicina nempe ego.
> Came(l)o(p)ardus (h)abet cor ut Achille(s) ob clar<r>ita(tem).
> Sum rabid(a). Ia(m) Volcanus e(m) medicina est
>
> (CIL 4.8873).

> I deny men are gods. Talus can win the contest, let him win!
> Apollo, like him, plays and sings to the lyre; I'm just a flute-girl.
> Achilles stood out – just like a giraffe.
> I'm furious: of course! I'll go to Vulcan for a cure.

Now that we have proposed a more plausible text, we can turn to its interpretation, and, in particular, the noun in which I am most interested: *tibicina*. The second line provides a particularly strong statement of identity with the combination of the emphatic *ego* ('I') and the assertive adverb *nempe* ('certainly, of course, as everybody knows'), used most often in Latin literature to state an obvious fact[79]. The noun *tibicina* identifies the speaker as a female performer on the *tibia*, a double hollow pipe pierced with holes equivalent to the Greek αὐλός. Woeckner provides a useful discussion of the role of the *tibicina* in Roman society and her characterization in literature:

> The *tibicina* and her Greek counterpart, the *auletris*, were low-status females in the employ of higher-status males. We have come to know them through stereotyped characterizations created by men. These entertainers are closely associated with the symposiastic traditions both at Rome and in Greece. Popular tradition tells us that her duties were twofold; she provided musical entertainment and offered her sexual services to the male guests. She was often a slave or a concubine; in several places she is referred to as a prostitute. The *tibicina* was associated with the pleasures of the wine-shop and she was often portrayed as inebriated and inclined to drink any alcohol not under lock and key[80].

While the *tibicina* was typically low-status and associated with performance and prostitution, however, she was also negatively gender-stereotyped in contrast to her male equivalent, the *tibicen*, who 'play[ed] at funerals, games, and plays, had the important duty of playing during a sacrifice

---

79 — See OLD s.v. *nempe*, and compare Ov. *Met.* 13.93, *nempe ego mille meo protexi pectore puppes* ('as everybody knows, I protected the thousand ships with my own chest').
80 — Woeckner (2002), 69; and see her nn. 20-22. See also Witzke (2015), n. 14.

[and] was a member of a *collegium* or professional guild'[81]. The contrast between the female, low-status performer and the divine Apollo and his professional title of *citharoedus* or 'lyre-player' only serves to emphasize the opposition between the 'versatile and respected male citharode who is associated with the civilized and stately music of the paean' (both Apollo and, by association with him, the male Talus, victor of the *pantorgana*), and 'the relatively limited female *tibiae* player' – thus also harking back to the mythical contest between the lyre-playing Apollo and the flute-player Marsyas, where Marsyas lost to Apollo's versatility upon the lyre and was flayed alive upon a tree[82]. The process of self-naming here, then, is both gender-specific (*tibicina*, as opposed to *tibicen*; *tibicina* vs. *citharoedus*; *tibicina* vs. Apollo / Talus) and deliberately self-deprecating: the rhetorical force of the phrase *tibicina nempe ego*, in contrast to the mastery of Apollo, is 'of course, I'm just a flute-girl'.

But there is another, subversive layer beneath the apparent self-depre-cation: one which appropriates the apparently negative term as a term for female authorship. We have already seen how a re-reading of the open-ing statement as *homines nego deos* ('I deny that men are gods') creates a polemical tone which opposes the *tibicina* to her male counterpart, Talus. Furthermore, the anonymous *tibicina* here is using the term in order both to conjure up the ostensible criticism of her by her male rivals – 'you're just a flute-girl' (the sense inherent in *nempe*) – and, at the same time, *using* that criticism in order to highlight, question and redefine the derogatory undertones of the term. The phrase *tibicina nempe ego* – both self-deprecating ('of course, I'm just a flute-girl') and defiantly assertive ('everyone knows I'm a flute-girl – so what?'), and set in direct contrast to the canonical male figure of *Apollo citharoedus* – thus both grounds the term *tibicina* in its deprecatory context as female performer and prosti-tute, and *performs the process of changing its meaning*. The existing label is taken on in a process of reclamation / reappropriation (along the lines of Michel Foucault's 'reverse discourse' and the many instances of 'reclaimed terms' in connection with race, ethnicity, sex and sexuality, where initially pejorative terms like 'dyke', 'queer' and 'nigger' have been reappropriated by in-group members)[83] and becomes, instead, a positive, private signal of her identity as a performer, as a woman – and as an author.

---

81 — Woeckner (2002), 69.

82 — Woeckner (2002), 71.

83 — On Foucault's 'reverse discourse' (initially applied in relation to homosexuality), see Foucault (1978), 101: 'it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturality" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified'. For an overview of the process of re-appropriation and the variability of terms within a fluid 'indexical field', see Eckert (2008), and for specific examples see Beaton & Washington (2015) (on the Brazilian

The primary means by which the author reclaims *tibicina* as a positive assertion of female identity is by demonstrating the full extent of her literary abilities. This is not only because she is performing her reclamation of her identity as *tibicina* in the context of a written graffito, and thus, because literary tools are all she has available to her. It is also because she draws a fundamental and important link throughout between her *musical performance* and her *poetic ability*. By drawing on archaic Greek models of orally performed poetry played to the accompaniment of musical instruments, the *tibicina* reinscribes her status as non-elite musician into an ancient lineage of female poetic performers: thus both elevating her rank and demonstrating the worthiness of her claim to challenge her opponent. Also, and most importantly, by connecting musical performance and poetic composition, the *tibicina* is able to transfer the musical contest (*pantorgana*) onto the walls of Pompeii – thus translating the medium of the competition from musical notes to words. The contest with Talus is continued in a re-pitched battle, staked out in written poetry rather than musical performance.

The first and most obvious example of her fusion of musical performance and poetry, drawing on ancient Greek models of orally performed poetry, is the figure of Apollo in the second line. Apollo is presented as singing (*cantat*), and is called *citharoedus* ('someone who sings to the accompaniment of the lyre'). That this is a primarily Greek model is demonstrated, not only by her choice of a Greek god (and the Greek god of poetry), but also by the particular words she uses: *citharoedus* is a Latin transliteration of the Greek term κιθαρῳδός, often used in Latin as a synonym for the archaic bard – most strikingly by Probus in his commentary on Virgil's *Eclogues*, as a transliteration of Herodotus' κιθαρῳδός Arion, the lyre-player and alleged creator of the poetic dithyramb[84]. The word, in itself, fuses musical accomplishment upon the lyre (κιθάρα / *cithara*) and the figure of the archaic Greek professional singer-poet (ἀοιδός, 'bard') – thus conjuring up the poetic terminology of sixth century Greece, 'which did not differentiate composers from performers'[85]. The Latin word *cantat* thus becomes a gloss upon the Greek term, ἀοιδός, hidden within the composite *citharoedus* / κιθαρῳδός, as well as alluding to Latin literary conventions of poetic 'song' (looking back, of course, to Greece; most

---

term *favelado*), Croom (2011) (on 'nigger'), McConnell-Ginet (2002) (on 'queer' / 'gay'), and Wong (2005) (on the Chinese term *tongzhi*).

    84 — Probus' commentary on Virgil's *Eclogues* 8.56, *Arion Methymnaeus citharoedus* (a direct transliteration of Herodotus' κιθαρῳδός at Hdt. 1.23); compare Auson. 44, 4.466,3 *Phemio citharoedo*. See further TLL s.v. *citharoedus*.

    85 — Ford (2002), 131; on the epic bard (ἀοιδός), see further Ford (1994), 90-130.

famously in Virgil's opening line of the *Aeneid*, *arma virumque cano* ['of arms and a man I sing'])[86].

From Greek-style *citharoedus* and poetic bard to Latin singing poet, Apollo therefore represents the connection the *tibicina* is making between archaic Greek performed and Latin written poetry, between musical performance and poetic composition. But these properties are not confined to the figure of Apollo alone. The reclamation of *tibicina* as a statement of her identity and authorship begins with the subversive *identification* between the *tibicina* and Apollo – not just the opposition between the two which we noted above as the surface message of the text. The compound noun *tibicina* is, in fact, formed from the combination of *tibia* (the flute-like instrument which we noted above) and the suffix *-cen*, from the verb *cano* – precisely the verb which is used to describe and gloss Apollo's singing (*cantat*)[87]. The term *tibicina*, then, by analogy with the Greek noun *citharoedus*, is reclaimed and reformed from its Roman associations with low status and sexual services to be on a par with the high-status Greek performing bard. Moreover, the two nouns, *citharoedus* and *tibicina*, parallel and mirror each other around the central verb *cantat*, creating an analogy between the Greek god and the Roman woman, the male and the female, the lyre-playing bard and the flute-playing poet. The musical contest between Talus and the *tibicina* is here recreated in the opposition and parallel set up between Apollo, the lyre-player, and the *tibicina* – at the very same time as, by the re-association with poetic song (repeated three times, *cithar<u>oedus</u> <u>cantat</u> Apollo tibi<u>cina</u>*), the competition is restaged within the poetic sphere.

Having restaged the contest and reclaimed the term *tibicina*, then, the author proceeds to combat her opponent with a literary tour-de-force which focuses around the first, and central, text of the western canon: Homer's *Iliad*. Her opening gambit in the third line signals this move, with a simile featuring the Iliadic hero Achilles. The mention of Achilles' heart (*cor*), and the comparison to an animal, provide a parody of Achilles' famous words in book 22 of the *Iliad*: ὡς οὐκ ἔστι λέουσι καὶ ἀνδράσιν ὅρκια πιστά, / οὐδὲ λύκοι τε καὶ ἄρνες ὁμόφρονα θυμὸν ἔχουσιν ('so there can be no trustworthy oaths between lions and men, / nor do wolves and lambs have hearts that are like-minded', *Il.* 22.262f.). At the same time, however, the author adds a humorous twist by transforming the wolves and lambs of Achilles' simile into a giraffe[88]. The fact

---

86 — On the term *cantare* in Latin literature (with particular reference to non-dramatic poetry), see Allen (1972).

87 — De Vaan (2008) s.v. *tibia*.

88 — Note that the accompanying picture beside the graffito, apparently drawn in the same hand, featured a quadruped with a long neck (possibly a giraffe); see Diehl (1930), 63 n. 831, *darunter vierfüßler auf der flucht*.

that the giraffe is explicitly masculinized here (*camelopardus*, as opposed to *camelopardalis*), as Woeckner has pointed out, suggests its comparison with the *tibicina's* opponent Talus[89] – as well as, more broadly, I would suggest, a parody of masculine models of poetry. Specifically, the noun *claritas* – which Woeckner correctly translates as 'distinctiveness' – also has another even more common meaning, that of 'glory, honour, renown'[90]. In the context of the mention of Achilles, it is hard not to see this as a Latin translation of the Greek word κλέος – which not only is frequent throughout the *Iliad* in describing Achilles' quest for glory, but which also, as Gregory Nagy has shown, functions as a synonym for 'poetry' in archaic Greek literature[91]. The joke therefore operates on multiple levels. On the one hand, the author gets in a dig at Talus via the masculinized giraffe: 'yes,' she effectively says, 'I suppose you're distinctive – like a giraffe'. At the same time, she demonstrates precisely that poetic prowess which she is placing in opposition to Talus' talents by demonstrating her knowledge of the Iliadic text, and her familiarity with epic poetic conventions of glory and κλέος.

The understanding of the Iliadic subtext of the epigram as part of the author's reclamation of her status as *tibicina*, and its reappropriation along the lines of the performing bard, also help to unravel what might otherwise be the most difficult allusion of the text: the recourse to Volcanus (the god Vulcan) as a cure for her anger[92]. The connection between anger and the god Vulcan – Hephaestus, in Greek – forms, I want to suggest, nothing less than a miniature reperformance of the *Iliad*, from its opening word, μῆνις ('wrath' = *rabida*) to the conclusion of Achilles' wrath against Agamemnon in book 18, when Achilles determines to return to war and his mother Thetis goes to Hephaestus to commission a new set of armour. In effect, the author of the Pompeiian graffito thus states, 'I am angry, like Achilles; Achilles' superb armour was made by Vulcan / Hephaestus; so I'll go to him for a really good flute and achieve victory over Talus next time'[93]. This serves not only to make yet another literary reference to the *Iliad*, and to demonstrate the *tibicina*'s knowledge and status as poet-

---

89 — Woeckner (2002), 70.

90 — See TLL s.v. *claritas* II.

91 — Nagy (1974), 231-255 and Nagy (1999), 16. See also Katz (1991), 6.

92 — Woeckner's suggestion, that Volcanus here should be seen as in some way connected to Mt. Vesuvius, is easily refuted; the Pompeiians clearly, as the well-known wall painting of Mt. Vesuvius shows, regarded Vesuvius only as a fertile mountain (and, if anything, connected it primarily with the god Bacchus); see Hughes (2013), 122-123, who demonstrates that Vitruvius and Strabo believed that Vesuvius had ceased erupting, and that Seneca and Pliny the Elder excluded Vesuvius from their lists of volcanoes entirely.

93 — The *tibia* was usually made of hollow cane or box-wood, whereas Vulcan / Hephaestus is typically associated with metal-working; the association thus serves implicitly to elevate the lowly wooden *tibia* to the status of the bronze *tuba* (war-trumpet) or *cornu* (horn).

bard; it also *reinserts* her back into the simile of line 3. Where Talus was formerly compared negatively to Achilles, the *tibicina* now replaces him and becomes / performs Achilles herself in the first person: *sum rabida* ('I am angry'), she says, enacting Achilles' μῆνις from *Iliad* 1. The negative distinctiveness, *claritas*, which she assigned to Talus by the pejorative comparison with the giraffe, then, is now transferred to her via Achilles to symbolize her poetic renown – and her ultimate victory in the newly staged musical-poetic contest.

This graffito thus uniquely performs the process of the rehabilitation of the term *tibicina*, whilst also defining its application to the female writer's sense of her own identity and authorship. Whilst on the surface the text proclaims the victory of Talus and self-deprecates its author as a mere *tibicina*, the association throughout the second line between musical performance and poetry restages the contest with Talus, and allows the author to introduce a rich subtext of Iliadic imagery which elevates the status of the *tibicina* to that of the Homeric bard. The noun is reclaimed to become a signature of the author's poetic ability, not of her low status; of her identity as a woman as opposed to masculine models of poetry; and of her subtle understanding of what it means to perform, as a musician, as an artist, and as a woman. Her performance as *tibicina* is thus not only an actual musical performance within a socially defined sphere; it becomes a metaphorical, highly literary performance of her voice, her authorship, and her identity.

Proba vatis

With the third and final case study of female authorship terminology, we move to a late antique Latin text from the fourth century CE, after the Christianization of the Empire in the wake of Constantine's conversion before his death in 337 CE and the institution of Christianity as state religion in 380 CE. We know very little about Proba other than her name[94]. She is usually identified with Faltonia Betitia Proba, wife of the urban prefect Clodius Celsinus Adelphius, and lived around 322-370 CE. She left us only one work, written around 360 CE in the form of a *cento*: a patchwork reordering of Virgilian verses to form a new (in this case Christian) narrative[95]. As Sigrid Cullhed points out, the *cento* became

---

94 — On Proba's biography and reception, see Cullhed (2015), 18-55; see also Green (1995), Trout (2005), 553.

95 — For a recently updated critical edition of Proba's *cento*, see Fassina & Lucarini (2015); translations and commentary are provided by Badini & Rizzi (2011) and Sineri (2011) (both in Italian). The bibliography on Proba has increased rapidly in recent years: Cullhed (2015) provides the most up-to-date survey of scholarship on Proba and an excellent analysis of the *cento* in relation to its later reception. See also Clark & Hatch (1981), Green (1995), Green (1997), Kaczynski (2002), Snyder (1991), 136-141, Stevenson (2005), 64-71. On the history of the *cento*, see Cullhed (2015), 7.

increasingly popular as a form in the third and fourth centuries CE; Virgil, in particular, became an important source of inspiration for later centoists, in no small part due to the influence of Proba's *cento*, which stands at the beginning of a long line of Virgilian interpretations[96].

I am interested here in the opening lines of Proba's *cento* and the ways in which she identifies and labels her authorship. Her identity as author and poet is explicitly expressed in the twelfth line of the *cento*, one of the few lines inserted by Proba herself (that is, without a Virgilian precedent), and therefore an important locus for identifying Proba's assertion of her identity[97]. I give a few lines of context:

> nunc, Deus omnipotens, sacrum, precor, accipe carmen
> aeternique tui septemplicis ora resolve   10
> Spiritus atque mei resera penetralia cordis,
> arcana ut possim vatis Proba cuncta referre
>
> > (Proba *Cento* 9-12).

> Now, almighty God, accept this sacred song, I pray,
> and unlock the mouths of your eternal sevenfold
> Spirit and unbar the depths of my heart,
> so that I, Proba, may set forth again all the mysteries of the poet.

This is not, however, the only possible translation. Cullhed succinctly summarizes the ambiguity surrounding the translation of the twelfth line:

> The word *vatis*, 'prophet' or 'poet', does not necessarily refer to Virgil (and perhaps the Cumaean Sibyl) – note that in a fifteenth-century manuscript *vatis* is glossed *Virgilii* –, but it may also be taken as an attribute of the subject in the nominative case: 'I, Proba the prophet / poet may disclose all mysteries', which has often been the case in modern scholarship. Alternatively, we could take *proba* as the adjective 'good' referring either to *vatis* as a subject: 'I, the worthy prophet / poet', or to *arcana*, giving the completely different translation: 'in order that I may disclose all the good mysteries of the prophet / poet'[98].

As Cullhed notes, there is a significant polarization in the scholarship as to how to translate *vatis* (line 12). At first sight, of course, it looks like the genitive singular of the masculine noun *vates*, which we saw was the common word for 'poet' in the Augustan era. Virgil, in particular, 'hat das Wort *vates* recht häufig verwandt, etwa 40 mal'[99] – perhaps most importantly of his own authorship at *Aen.* 7.41, *tu vatem tu diva mone* ('you,

---

96 — Cullhed (2015), 1-3.
97 — Fassina & Lucarini (2015), 6 ad loc, Cullhed (2015), 192.
98 — Cullhed (2015), 18. On the pun *Proba / proba*, see also Hinds (2014), 195 n. 51.
99 — Dahlmann (1948), 351.

goddess – guide your poet')[100]. And when later Roman poets wanted to talk of Virgil, it was the word *vates* that they applied to him above all as both the greatest exponent and consummate representative of the term[101]: Seneca, in *De Brevitate Vitae* 9.2 calls Virgil *maximus vates et velut divino ore instinctus* ('the greatest poet and inspired, as if with a divine voice'), whilst Columella in his *De Re Rustica* 10. *praef.* 3 calls Virgil *vatis maxime venerandi* ('a poet greatly to be revered')[102].

In this scenario, then, taking the *vatis* in Proba's *cento* as drawing on the tradition associating Virgil with *vates*, *vatis* would be dependent on *arcana*, and would act as a synonym for Virgil, the original *vates*[103]. This interpretation, however, has lately given way to a preference, as we saw Cullhed discussing above, for reading *vatis* as a nominative in apposition with Proba: thus giving, for example, in Plant's translation, 'so that I, Proba, prophet, can recall all mysteries'[104].

What is interesting about the various translations and commentaries on this line is that a) all commentators assume there must be one or the other interpretation, i.e., that the two potential translations of *vatis* as genitive and nominative cannot co-exist[105]; and b) none of the translators and / or commentators who translates *vatis Proba* as 'Proba the prophetess / poet' explains why Proba would choose to use *vatis* instead of the far more common nominative *vates*[106].

---

100 — Other examples include Virg. *Ecl.* 7.28 and 9.34, Virg. *Aen.* 6.662.

101 — Dahlmann (1948), 353, 'als *vates* bezeichnen spätere römische Schriftsteller ihre großen Dichter, vorzüglich Virgil, den Inaugurator sowohl als auch den höchsten Vollender des neuen Begriffes vom Dichter, der sich mit dem neuen Wort verknüpfte'.

102 — See Dahlmann (1948), 353.

103 — For this view, see Bažil (2009), 119 n. 17 and Wiesen (1971), 72 (both cited at Cullhed [2015], 18 n. 2); see also Fassina & Lucarini (2015), 6 ad loc. (not cited by Cullhed), who note beneath *vatis 'scilicet Vergili'* ('clearly Virgil'). Fassina and Lucarini also cite variant manuscript traditions containing *vates* for *vatis*.

104 — Plant (2004), 172. Green (1997), 553 is the most well-known proponent of this view; see Cullhed (2015), 18 n. 2 for a comprehensive list of translators who prefer this reading.

105 — See, by way of an example, Sineri (2011), 95: 'la scelta tra le due interpretazioni è, a parer mio, molto difficile... Personalment propenderei per accogliere la proposta di Green di intendere *vatis* come apposizione di *Proba*'.

106 — Green (1997), 553 n. 28 comes closest to explaining the usage of *vatis* here, with a reference to Neue and Wagener's *Formenlehre der lateinischen Sprache* and citation of alternative readings. Clark & Hatch (1981), 189 note briefly that 'the word *vates* means both poet and seer', but make no mention of their decision to read *vatis* as a nominative rather than a genitive. Springer (1988), 81 writes only 'in line 12 [Proba] refers to herself as a *vatis*'. Snyder (1991), 137 comments that 'in her prefatory remarks, Proba proclaims herself a "vatis", using a word that had a long history of referring not only to seers and prophets but also to bards'; Stevenson (2005), 66 similarly remarks 'Augustan poets distinguish *vatis* from *poeta*: a *vatis* is a serious poet, whose works are instructive, while a *poeta* is a maker of verses' – both making it seem as if *vatis* were commonly the nominative of the noun (whereas it is attested only twice in Latin literature outside Proba's *cento*; see further page 28 below. Schnapp (1992), 108, on the other hand, writes that Proba calls herself a *vates*, bypassing the marked usage of *vatis* entirely (see also 120); while Badini & Rizzi (2011), 150-151 omit any discussion of *vatis* at line 12.

To begin with the first point: it is a well-known problem in translation studies that a translation is forced, by the nature of the differences between the target and source languages, to reduce a word which may have multiple meanings in the source language to a single term – and thus to undermine the interconnections and subtextual meanings forged within the source text. Jeremy Munday explains this variously as 'qualitative impoverishment' – 'the replacement of words and expressions with TT [target text] equivalents "that lack their sonorous richness or, correspondingly, their signifying 'iconic' features"' – and 'the destruction of underlying networks of signification'[107]. The issue at stake with translating *vatis* as *either* a genitive singular referring to Virgil *or* a nominative singular referring to Proba is that we lose the subtle interconnections forged between Virgil and Proba, precisely through the linguistic ambiguity that Proba's *vatis* invokes. The flexibility of the Latin case system allows for a double meaning within the line: both *arcana vatis referre* ('to set forth again the mysteries of the poet [Virgil]'), and *arcana vatis Proba referre* ('I, Proba the prophet, to set forth again the mysteries'). Once again, we see the female author evoking the traditional stance of deference in the surface text, with homage paid to the canonical male author and source text, Virgil – whilst evoking and placing herself within a literary tradition of labelling Virgil as *vates*. At the same time, on the subtextual level, we see her turning the tables through the flexibility and multiple interpretations of *vatis* to apply this resonant poetic term to herself. If we force *vatis* to have a single referent, then we lose the complexity and depth of Proba's text – as well as the subtle way in which she both calls upon traditional models of deference to Virgil, identifies herself with the poet, and presents a subversive self-definition, all within a single word.

Moving on to the second point, the lack of an explanation by commentators for why Proba might have chosen the nominative form *vatis* instead of the more usual *vates*. Of course, *vatis* is a perfectly acceptable, if rarer, alternative nominative of *vates*: some -*i*- stem Latin nouns such as *caedes*, *clades*, *fames* and *vates* also have a collateral -*is* form in the nominative singular (*caedis*, *cladis*, *famis*, *vatis*)[108]. *vatis* as nominative of *vates* is attested twice in Latin literature (omitting Proba), once in Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus* 911, and again in Cicero's *De Divinatione* 2.12[109]. Most translators seem to be assuming (without explanation) that *vatis* here functions as a two-termination masculine / feminine nominative singular, on the analogy of two-termination nouns like *civis*[110]. This is a perfectly

---

107 — Munday (2016), 223, citing Berman (2004), 291.
108 — Kent (1946), 44 § 261.
109 — See OLD s.v. *vates*.
110 — Compare Ovid's *vates Lesbia* (*Tr*. 3.7.20), where the feminine adjective shows *vates* being

valid interpretation, and in fact adds to the subtle interweaving of Virgil and Proba as *vates*, linked both through the usage of the same noun and through its applicability as both masculine and feminine here. And yet, given the rarity of the *-is* form, one cannot help wondering why Proba selected this particular variant; especially since, as we saw above, this is one of the few lines without a direct Virgilian model.

In fact, I want to suggest that Proba deliberately chose the less common form at the opening of her *cento* in order both to allow for its overt association with Virgil and the masculine poet in its capacity for interpretation as the masculine genitive singular – and, at the same time, to imbue it with a new meaning. Whilst *-i-* stem nouns ending in *-es* occasionally appear with an *-is* form nominative, there are also plenty of third declension *feminine* nouns whose nominative singular ends in *-is* – such as *navis*, *finis*, *turris*, *ovis*, and so on. And in that context, *vatis* might look less like an unusual form of *vates*, and more like a coinage of a feminine counterpart to *vates* which signals both its similarity to and difference from the traditional male poetic vocabulary. Rather than simply using a less common form of the noun *vates*, then, Proba is manipulating the ambiguity inherent in *vatis* in order to create a triple layer of meaning: as a masculine genitive singular (referring to Virgil); a two-termination masculine / feminine nominative singular (referring to Proba, connecting her to Virgil); and as a new coinage altogether, a feminine nominative singular noun meaning 'prophetess / poetess', and referring solely to Proba. The reinscription of the Virgilian *vates* into the Proban *vatis* mirrors, on a verbal level, what Proba is doing with her *cento* as a whole: the assimilation and subtle reorganization of Virgil into something entirely new.

This is, then, not simply a case of a female poet hiding her gendered identity by accepting conventional masculine terms for poetic authorship: it is a marked instance of Proba both overtly alluding to Virgilian poetics, and, at the same time, beneath the surface of the text, coining a new feminine term for herself which models both the connectedness and the difference between male and female, Virgilian and Proban poetics. The femininity of the noun is highlighted by the subtle pun, noted by Cullhed above, on Proba / *proba*, where the adjective *proba* ('good, fitting') could be taken as referring either to the *arcana* at the start of the line, or, in a typically subversive slippage of meaning, to the female *vatis* herself. The juxtaposition of *vatis Proba*, and its echo of Ovid's famous *vates Lesbia* from *Tristia* 3.7.20 (the only other instance in Latin poetry where *vates* is used of a female poet)[111], thus both underlines the female

---

applied as a two-termination noun; see further n. 111 below.

111 — As far as I have been able to find; *vates* occurs with reference to female seers (particularly in Virgil's *Aeneid: Aen.* 6.65 and 211 of the Sibyl, 3.187 of Cassandra; see also Sen. *Troades* 37, of

gender of the noun *vatis* – deliberately inviting speculation as to whether it is masculine, masculine / feminine, feminine, or indeed all three –, and, most importantly of all, provides a commentary on the word-choice of *vatis* itself as particularly 'fitting' to the author's intent. The female *vatis* is not only called Proba, the line suggests; the word *vatis*, with its Virgilian allusions, its subtle layering of meaning, and its hints at the assertion of a female gendered poetics, is indeed a particularly fitting (*proba*) tribute to its elusive female author.

Conclusion

As always with any study of women's writing in antiquity, any conclusions we draw can only be suggestive. I began by noting the small number of female-authored texts that survive from ancient Rome, and it is important to emphasize again here that the case studies presented above can only provide us with tantalizing, if evocative, hints of the ways in which female authors writing in Latin from the early Empire to late antiquity might have talked about their authorship. The time-period presented above is too broad, and the evidence too scarce, to be able to give any wide-ranging conclusions about female authorship terminology as a whole. This does not, however, mean that such windows onto female authorial self-presentation are not useful and important in and of themselves – both as they add to our understanding of the individual female writers and their works, and also as a way into recreating and beginning to understand the complex, many-faceted interaction of gender and authorship in antiquity.

Perhaps most illuminating are the various ways in which each female author responds to and reacts differently to male authorship terminology. We have seen how the late antique author Proba, engaging in a poetic genre which reformulates and recreates Virgilian poetry into something new, uses the ambiguity of the form *vatis* both to connect herself to and differentiate herself from Virgil – both maintaining an overtly deferential attitude on the surface of the text, and, on another reading, defining her particularly allusive and gendered vision of her authorship. The *tibicina* from Pompeii engages directly with a male term for authorship, the *citharoedus*, harking back to archaic Greek authorship models to connect musical performance and poetic composition, and so to reclaim her own authorial status as *tibicina* as a citharoedic equivalent. And Sulpicia draws on the ambiguity of *lectrix* as reader / poet to create an entirely new term for female authorship which emphasizes her femininity and creative motherhood through the blurring of the identities of poet and audience, mistress and slave.

Cassandra), but not (excepting this line in Ovid) poets.

Common to all three female poets, too, is the way in which they label their authorship at the level of the subtext, through the subversive 'coding' of the text's content and the subtle, hidden interplay of meanings and verbal interactions to create a complex layering of the public female voice, at first glance, and the deeper resonances of female authorial self-definition upon a closer look. Rather than overtly stating their identity, each of these female authors hides her exploration of her status as a woman and a poet beneath an appropriately coded statement of female piety – whether it is a mistress mourning the death of her slave, a *tibicina* accepting defeat by her male rival, or a poet expressing her debt to the *vates* Virgil. Yet these texts repay a closer look – because it is only in uncovering the mask performed by these women poets that we begin to unravel the complicated, subversive statements of their identity. It is by listening to them, and not only to what their male counterparts say about them, that we see how they understood their role in a society in which women's voices were largely silenced, and in which their poetry was an exception, not the norm. They are indeed – to return to Ovid's felicitous phrase – *optimae propriorum nominum auctores*: 'the best authors of, and authorities on, their own names'.

Works cited

Allen W., (1972), 'Ovid's *cantare* and Cicero's *cantores Euphorionis*', *TAPhA* 103, 1-14.

Badini A. and Rizzi A. (eds.), (2011), *Il centone: Introduzione, Testo, Traduzione e Commento*, Bologna.

Baird J. and Taylor C. (eds.), (2011), *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, New York.

Balogh J., (1927), 'Voces paginarum: Beiträge zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens und Schreibens', *Philologus* 82, 85-109, 202-240.

Bažil M., (2009), *Centones Christiani: Métamorphoses d'une Forme Intertextuelle dans la Poésie Latine Chrétienne de l'Antiquité Tardive*, Paris.

Beard M., (2014a), 'Did Women in Greece and Rome Speak?', *British Museum Blog*, https://blog.britishmuseum.org/2014/03/24/did-women-in-greece-and-rome-speak/.

       (2014b), 'The Public Voice of Women', *LRB* 36 (6), 11-14.

Beaton M. E. and Washington H. B., (2015), 'Slurs and the Indexical Field: The Pejoration and Reclaiming of *Favelado* "Slum-Dweller"', *Language Sciences* 52, 12-21.

Benefiel R., (2016), 'The Culture of Writing Graffiti within Domestic Spaces at Pompeii', in R. Benefiel and P. Keegan (eds.), *Inscriptions in the Private Sphere in the Greco-Roman World*, Leiden, 80-110.

Benefiel R. and Keegan P. (eds.), (2016), *Inscriptions in the Private Sphere in the Greco-Roman World*, Leiden.

Berman A., (2004), 'Translation and the Trials of the Foreign', in L. Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, London, 284-297.

Bradley J. R., (1995), 'The Elegies of Sulpicia: An introduction and commentary', *New England Classical Newsletter* 22 (4), 159-164.

Cagnat R. and Besnier M., (1929), 'Périodiques', *L'Année Épigraphique* (1928), 1-44.

Carcopino J., (1929), 'Séance Du 30 Janvier', *BSAF* (1929), 84-86.

Cixous H., (1976), 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs* 1 (4), 875-893.

Clark E. A. and Hatch D. F., (1981), *The Golden Bough, the Oaken Cross: The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba*, Chico CA.

Croom A. M., (2011), 'Slurs', *Language Sciences* 33 (3), 343-358.

Cullhed S. S., (2015), *Proba the Prophet: The Christian Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba*, Leiden.

De la Durantaye K., (2007), 'The Origins of the Protection of Literary Authorship in Ancient Rome', *Boston University International Law Journal*, 25 (37), 37-111.

De Vaan M. A. C., (2008), *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages*, Leiden.

Della Casa A., (1995), 'L'uso del termine *poeta* a Roma nell'età augustea', in L. Belloni, G. Milanese and A. Porro (eds.), *Studia Classica Iohanni Tarditi oblata*, Milan, 51-62.

Della Corte M., (1927), 'Pompei: Regione I', *NSA* 5, 106f.

        (ed.), (1955), *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, Voluminis Quarti Supplementi Pars Tertia. Inscriptiones Pompeianae Parietariae et Vasorum Fictilium*, Berlin.

Dickison S. K. and Hallett J. P., (2014), *A Roman Women Reader: Selections from the Second Century BCE through Second Century CE*, Mundelein IL.

Diehl E., (1930), *Pompeianische Wandinschriften und Verwandtes*, 2nd ed., Berlin.

Dutsch D., (2008), '*Nenia*: Gender, Genre, and Lament in Ancient Rome', in *Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond*, Oxford, 258-279.

Eckert P., (2008), 'Variation and the indexical field', *Journal of sociolinguistics* 12 (4), 453-476.

Fantham E., (2013), *Roman Literary Culture: From Plautus to Macrobius*, 2nd ed., Baltimore.

Fassina A. and Lucarini C. M. (eds.), (2015), *Cento Vergilianus*, Berlin.

Finley M. I., (2002), 'The Silent Women of Rome', in L. McClure (ed.), *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sources*, Oxford, 147-160.

Flaschenriem B. L., (2005), 'Sulpicia and the rhetoric of disclosure', in Greene (2005), 169-191.

Ford A., (1994), *Homer: The Poetry of the Past*, Ithaca NY.

(2002), 'The Origin of the Word "Poet"', in *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece*, Princeton, 131-157.

Foucault M., (1978), *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, New York.

Gavrilov A. K., (1997), 'Techniques of Reading in Classical Antiquity', *CQ* 47 (1), 56-73.

Gilbert S. M. and Gubar S., (1985), *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: Early twentieth-century through contemporary*, New York.

Green R. P. H., (1995), 'Proba's Cento: Its Date, Purpose, and Reception', *CQ* 45 (2), 551-563.

(1997), 'Proba's Introduction to Her Cento', *CQ* 47 (2), 548-559.

Greene E., (2005), *Women Poets in Ancient Greece and Rome*, Norman.

Habinek T. N., (2001), *The Politics of Latin Literature: Writing, Identity, and Empire in Ancient Rome*, Princeton.

Hallett J. P., (1989), 'Women as same and other in classical Roman elite', *Helios* 16, 59-78.

(2002), 'The Eleven Elegies of the Augustan Poet Sulpicia', in Churchill, Brown and Jeffrey (2002), 45-65.

(2009), 'Absent Roman Fathers in the Writings of Their Daughters: Cornelia and Sulpicia', in S. R. Hübner and D. M. Ratzan (eds.), *Growing Up Fatherless in Antiquity*, Cambridge, 175-191.

(2010), 'Human Connections and Paternal Evocations: Two Elite Roman Women Writers and the Valuing of Others', in R. Rosen and I. Sluiter (eds.), *Valuing Others in Classical Antiquity*, Leiden, 353-373.

Hauser E., (2016), 'In Her Own Words: The Semantics of Female Authorship in Ancient Greece, from Sappho to Nossis', *Ramus* 45 (2): 1-32.

Hellinger M. and Bussmann H., (2001), *Gender Across Languages: The Linguistic Representation of Women and Men*, Amsterdam.

Hemelrijk E. A., (1999), *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman Élite from Cornelia to Julia Domna*, London, New York.

Hinds S., (1987), 'The Poetess and the Reader: Further Steps towards Sulpicia', *Hermathena* (143), 29-46.

(2014), '"The Self-Conscious Cento"', in M. Formisano and T. Fuhrer (eds.), *Décadence: 'Decline and Fall' or 'Other Antiquity'?*, Heidelberg, 171-198.

Hinojo A., (1978), 'El término auctor en Cicerón', *Emerita* 46, 319-333.

Holst-Warhaft G., (1992), *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature*, London, New York.

Holzberg N., (1998), 'Four Poets and a Poetess or a Portrait of the Poet as a Young Man? Thoughts on Book 3 of the Corpus Tibullianum', *CJ* 94 (2), 169-191.

Horsfall N., (2003), *The Culture of the Roman Plebs*, London.

Hubbard T. K., (2004), 'The Invention of Sulpicia', *CJ* 100 (2), 177-194.

Hughes J. D., (2012), 'Responses to Natural Disasters in the Greek and Roman World', in K. Pfeifer and N. Pfeifer (eds.), *Forces of Nature and Cultural Responses*, Dordrecht, 111-137.

Johnson W. A., (2010), *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities*, Oxford.

Johnston H. W., (1905), 'The Name', in *The Private Life of the Romans*, Chicago, 35-48.

Kaczynski B. M., (2002), 'Faltonia Betitia Proba: A Virgilian Cento in Praise of Christ', in Churchill, Brown and Jeffrey (2002), 131-149.

Kaster R. A., (1978), 'Servius and Idonei Auctores', *AJPh* 99 (2), 181-209.

Katz M., (1991), *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey*, Princeton.

Keith A., (1997), 'Tandem venit amor: A Roman Woman Speaks of Love', in J. P. Hallett and M. B. Skinner (eds.), *Roman Sexualities*, Princeton, 295-310.

        (2006), 'Critical Trends in Interpreting Sulpicia', *CW* 100 (1), 3-10.

Kent R. G., (1946), *The forms of Latin: A descriptive and historical morphology*, Baltimore.

Knox B., (1968), 'Silent reading in antiquity', *GRBS* 9, 421-435.

Lanser S. S., (1992), *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*, Ithaca NY.

Lattimore R. A., (1962), *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs*, Urbana.

Lefkowitz M. and Fant M. B. (eds.), (2005), *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation*, 3rd ed., Baltimore.

Lowe N. J., (1988), 'Sulpicia's Syntax', *CQ* 38 (1), 193-205.

Lowrie M., (2009), *Writing, Performance, and Authority in Augustan Rome*, Oxford.

McConnell-Ginet S., (2002), 'Queering semantics: Definitional struggles', in K. Campbell-Kibler *et al.* (eds.), *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice*, Stanford, 137-160.

Merriam C. U., (2005), 'Sulpicia and the Art of Literary Allusion: [Tibullus] 3.13', in Greene (2005), 158-168.

Milnor K., (2002), 'Sulpicia's (Corpo)reality: Elegy, Authorship and the Body in [Tibullus] 3.13', *CA* 21 (2), 259-282.

        (2014), *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape in Roman Pompeii*, Oxford.

Moi T., (1985), *Sexual/textual Politics*, London.

Munday J., (2016), *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*, 4th ed., Abingdon, New York.

Nagy G., (1974), *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter*, Cambridge MA.

(1999), *The best of the Achaeans*, Baltimore.

(2010), 'Ancient Greek Elegy', in K. Weisman (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, Oxford, 13-45.

Newman J. K., (1967), *The Concept of Vates in Augustan Poetry*, Brussels.

Paoli U. E., (1922), '*Legere* e *recitare*', *A&R* 3, 205-207.

Pariente D. A., (1964), 'Auctor y auctoritas', *Actas del II Congreso español de Estudios clásicos*, 228-237.

Parker H., (1994), 'Sulpicia, the "Auctor de Sulpicia", and the authorship of 3.9 and 3.11 of the "Corpus Tibullianum"', *Helios*, 21 (1), 39-62.

Peirano I., (2014), '"Sealing" the book: Sphragis as paratext', in L. Jansen (ed.), *The Roman Paratext*, Cambridge, 224-242.

Plant I. M. (ed.), (2004), *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: An Anthology*, Norman.

Richlin A., (2014), *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women*, Ann Arbor.

Runes M., (1926), 'Geschichte des Wortes "vates"', in *Festschrift für Paul Kretschmer: Beiträge zur griechischen und lateinischen Sprachforschung*, Vienna, New York, 202-216.

Santirocco M. S., (1979), 'Sulpicia Reconsidered', *CJ* 74 (3), 229-239.

Schnapp J. T., (1992), 'Reading lessons: Augustine, Proba, and the Christian détournement of antiquity', *Stanford Literature Review* 9 (2), 99-124.

Sineri V. (ed.), (2011), *Il centone di Proba*, Rome.

Skoie M., (2013), '"The woman"', in T. S. Thorsen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*, Cambridge, 83-96.

Skutsch O. (ed.), (1985), *The Annals of Quintus Ennius*, Oxford.

Snyder J. M., (1991), *The Woman and the Lyre: Women Writers in Classical Greece and Rome*, Bristol.

Springer C. P. E., (1988), *The Gospel as Epic in Late Antiquity: The Paschale Carmen of Sedulius*, Leiden.

Starr R. J., (1991), 'Reading Aloud: *Lectores* and Roman Reading', *CJ* 86 (4), 337-343.

Stevenson J., (2005), *Women Latin Poets: Language, Gender, and Authority, from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford.

Suter A., (2008), *Lament: Studies in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond*, Oxford.

Theodorakopoulos E., (1999), 'Closure: the Book of Virgil', in C. Martindale (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, Cambridge, 155-166.

Tiedemann R. V., (2007), 'Poeta Vates', in H. Cancik and H. Schneider (eds.), *Brill's New Pauly: Antiquity*, Leiden.

Trout D. E., (2005), 'Latin Christian Epics of Late Antiquity', in J. M. Foley (ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, Oxford, 550-561.

Varone A., (2012), *Titulorum graphio exaratorum qui in C.I.L. vol. IV collecti sunt: Imagines*, Rome.

Väänänen V., (1966), *Le latin vulgaire des inscriptions pompéiennes*, 3rd ed., Berlin.

Veremans J., (2006), 'La sphragis dans les "Amores" d'Ovide: une approche stylistique et rhétorique', *Latomus* 65 (2), 378-387.

Watkins C., (1995), *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*, New York, Oxford.

Weisman K. (ed.), (2010), *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, Oxford.

White P., (2013), *Promised Verse: Poets in the Society of Augustan Rome*, Cambridge MA.

Wiesen D. S., (1971), 'Virgil, Minucius Felix and the Bible', *Hermes* 99, 70-91.

Wiseman T. P., (1982), '*Pete Nobiles Amicos*: Poets and Patrons in Late Republican Rome', in B. K. Gold (ed.), *Literary and Artistic Patronage in Ancient Rome*, Austin, 28-49.

         (2015), *The Roman Audience: Classical Literature As Social History*, Oxford.

Witzke S. S., (2015), 'Harlots, Tarts, and Hussies: A Problem of Terminology for Sex Labor in Roman Comedy', *Helios* 42 (1), 7-27.

Woeckner E., (2002), 'Women's Graffiti from Pompeii', in Churchill, Brown and Jeffrey (2002), 67-84.

Wong A. D., (2005), 'The reappropriation of *tongzhi*', *Language in Society* 34 (5), 763-793.