

Inscribing Invidia: The Epigraphic Expression of Envy in Pompeii

Envy is a near-universal human emotion, yet it is one that is only rarely articulated directly. Using research grounded in psychology, this paper examines epigraphic texts (graffiti, curse tablets, political posters) from Pompeii that engage with envy, contrasting them with the literary portrayals of elite authors. In doing so, I highlight the distinct ways in which envy was expressed by the non-elite, ordinary inhabitants of Pompeii.

I begin with one of the most famous Pompeian graffiti, *CIL* IV.8258–8259, which records a love triangle between a weaver named Successus, a woman named Iris (the enslaved woman of an innkeeper), and a rival suitor, Severus. This graffito is especially notable because it employs a derivative of *invidia*, one of the very few surviving Pompeian inscriptions to do so explicitly. It is also likely written about three enslaved persons, or at the very least those of low social standing. It thereby illustrates key dynamics of envy identified in modern psychology: as Aristotle already observed (*Rhet.* II.10), envy tends to arise among individuals of similar standing, a phenomenon corroborated by modern social-psychological studies (Salovey & Rodin 1984). As R. H. Smith succinctly puts it, “we envy people who are similar to ourselves” (2004, 45). This graffito therefore illuminates not only the interpersonal tensions of Pompeian daily life but also the expression of envy among non-elites and perhaps the enslaved themselves.

Hostility, according to Smith (2004, 47), is one of envy’s defining features—without it, the emotion might be more properly categorized as admiration. A striking illustration of this hostile dimension appears in one of the earliest known Roman curse tablets, found in the Fondo Azzolini necropolis outside Pompeii (*CIL* IV.9251). Though fragmentary, the text seems to curse a certain Philematio, slave of Hostilius, ensuring that she become hateful to a man (likely the

beloved of the curser), that he become hateful to her, and that they be unable to have children together. As Varone notes, the curse frequently uses the second person singular, “which reveals, psychologically, how the woman’s thoughts are constantly focused on the man who had been taken from her” (Varone 2008, 129). In terms of social psychology, this form of *invidia* aligns with what Fiske (2010, 15) terms “malignant envy”: the desire not merely to possess what another has, but to ensure that the other is deprived of it. Put simply: “I wish you did not have what you have” (Fiske 2010, 15).

A final case study (*CIL* IV.3775) shifts the focus to a third epigraphic genre, *programmata*—public political notices painted on walls. A rather typical endorsement of Lucius Staius Receptus for the office of *duovir* is accompanied by an addition from Aemilius Celer, the *scriptor* (painter of the inscription) who curses the *invidiose* (“envious one”) who might whitewash the inscription. I consider this *programma* within its physical setting and alongside what can be inferred about Celer from his other inscriptions, arguing that the charge of envy operated as a rhetorical tool to bolster political ties and undermine opponents

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that envy in Pompeii was not only a private emotion but one frequently expressed in public and communal contexts. Whether through graffiti, curse tablets, or political *programmata*, accusations of *invidia* gained force through visibility. The act of inscribing envy into the urban fabric of Pompeii underscores both its social significance and its rhetorical utility among non-elites.

Bibliography

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