Desire and Deniability in Queer History

This paper uses two erotic poems, *CIL* IV 5296 and Tibullus 1.4, to explore problems and opportunities that plausible deniability has presented to people who wanted to live in non-normative ways and can present to queer historical projects in the present day.

Willful obliviousness is manifest in the history of scholarship on *CIL* IV 5296. This erotic graffito from Pompeii addresses a beloved as "darling girl" (*pupula*, *CIL* IV 5296.3), but despite the feminine participle *perdita* (*CIL* IV 5296.5), which refers to the speaker, and despite the criticism of men in verse 4, some scholars have worked hard not to read one woman expressing desire for another in this poem. Milnor (2014) reviews this scholarly history and carefully exposes the weaknesses of the arguments. Her own stance, though, is still cautious: "by seriously engaging with the possibility that *CIL* 4. 5296 represents an erotic communication between women, we can actually understand the logic of the poem in different terms, and hear in it a voice not elsewhere represented in Latin poetry" (Milnor 2014: 217-18). The denial of this possibility in earlier scholarship (Varone 2002: 100-2 is an exception) provides a case study in how even dubious deniability can be used to erase non-normative people and their desires and to stymie queer historical projects.

Tibullus 1.4 is ostensibly a poem about aging men trying to attract the affections of boys, but a coded solicitation of a different sort can be read at verses 77ff. I argue that the speaker of Tibullus 1.4, an adult man, uses ambiguous wording to express his desire to be sexually penetrated by other adult men without running afoul of social conventions that proscribed this desire. By using ambiguous wording, he maintains plausible deniability and so both eschews an overt challenge to the dominant mores of Roman masculinity and avoids the negative social consequences that could follow such a challenge. Plausible deniability can thus grant a degree of

freedom to people who want to live in proscribed ways (cf. Ahl 1984). But the plausible deniability in verses 77-8 also protects readers or audience members unsympathetic to the speaker's desire: They can remain, willfully or otherwise, unaware of a gender performance that might destabilize their understandings masculinity.

Milnor and I can read the speakers of *CIL* IV 5296 and Tibullus 1.4 as non-normative, and we can show that the texts can support these readings. I suggest that treating plausible deniability as plausible affirmability can bring fresh evidence to the sort of historical project Traub (2013: 35-6) outlines: "a queer historicism dedicated to showing how categories, however mythic, phantasmic, and incoherent, came to be" and "To understand the arbitrary nature of coincidence and convergence, of sequence and consequence, and to follow them through to the entirely contingent outcomes to which they contributed…" I then consider whether and how plausibility can contribute to projects of building queer communities across time as Dinshaw (1999) and others including, very recently in classics, Matzner (2016) have described them.

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