Female Voice and Violence in *Nux*

Much of the literature surrounding the elegiac poem *Nux* focuses either on its contested Ovidian authorship (Knox 2009) or its reception (Bohm 2006). These have, of course, included some discussion of the poem's content for itself, but there have been few studies examining its allegorical interpretations. Beck (1965) recognized this interpretive gap and sought to link analysis of its subject matter with the question of authorship. However, much of his discussion still assumes a close connection with Ovid, whether that is through composition or inspiration. This paper puts aside the question of authorship and approaches the poem on its own terms.

Although it does not feature a strict metamorphosis in the narrative itself, the *Nux* fits neatly into the Ovidian tradition of personification. Told from the perspective of a nut tree growing along a road, it laments a life of undeserved harassment and perilous fertility, as it is this abundance that draws its attackers. The poem appears to be relatively straightforward, until a notably graphic scene prompts a second look into the anthropomorphism of the tree (65–76).

The tree says that whenever she bears fruit, a rod beats and wounds her to make the nuts fall to the ground. Boys then play various games with the harvest, in which there is opportunity for some unspecified reward. I demonstrate that a single term placed just before this scene complicates the seemingly simple game (65–66): *Sole licet siccaque siti peritura laborem, / irriguae dabitur non mihi sulcus aquae*. ("Although I toil, about to perish from the sun and dry thirst, a furrow of irrigating water is not given to me.") We can define *sulcus* as either an agricultural furrow or a woman's genitals (*L&S* s. v. 2 cf. IIB2). While the former at first seems more fitting to the pastoral environment, both Lucretius (4.1272) and Vergil (*Georg*. 3.136) metaphorically link agricultural fertility with human sexuality by using the alternative

definition of *sulcus*. Despite the figurative language, and contrary to the word's "clearly…

inoffensive tone" cited by Adams (1982), both instances clearly refer to female genitalia, and

both in a context of sexual intercourse and potential conception.

More importantly, this is not the only loaded word. Other anatomically and sexually

suggestive terms—*rima* "crack" (67), *pertica* "rod" (68), *ictus* "blow, stroke" (73)—and

description in this scene and beyond activate the latter definition of *sulcus* and prompt a second

look at the poem in its entirety. An allegorical interpretation emerges, concealed by the lack of

explicit metamorphosis, and the complaint becomes not that of a tree but of a woman fearing

sexual predation and a resulting pregnancy.

Other scenes in the *Nux* fit into this reading. The use of passive voice complicates agency

and responsibility (1–2). The tree lives on the roadside and is therefore more vulnerable, so

blame is partially removed from the attackers due to their victim's situation and identity. The

tree's generic observations on the nature of prosecution and innocence are a statement

of her own fate, as she is punished for being in possession of something desired (3–4, 41–

42). The descriptive game scene that introduces *sulcus* speaks of risk and reward shared

unevenly between parties (75). The entire narrative is shifted from the perspective of an

unfortunate nut tree to the considerably more complex and dangerous life of a woman in ancient

Rome.

These findings help us return to the question of authorship with a more open mind.

Putting aside assumptions based on the tradition of extant ancient literature, we can begin

to consider gender and class when hypothesizing the writer of the *Nux*. This requires engaging

with issues relevant to gendered voice, a topic already present in studies of Sulpicia's elegies and

Ovid's *Heroides*. Questions relating to the existence of ancient female authorship (Hubbard

2005, Keith 2006) and the nature of female voice, both genuine and emulated (Gordon 1997,

Lindheim 2003), will aid an investigation into the authorship and interpretation of the *Nux*.

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