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VIRGILIAN RECEPTION IN THE *SULPICIAE CONQUESTIO*

The *Sulpiciae Conquestio* that has been transmitted as part of the *Epigrammata Bobiensia* is a curious work, one that is replete with intertextual allusions to Virgil's *Aeneid* in particular. Close examination of the course of its argument will reveal that its author offers reflections on Virgil's depiction of the place of war and peace in Roman history, with emphasis on the point that peace can be enervating and corrosive to the Roman polity. The *Conquestio* thus stands forth as a late Flavian Age commentary on the problems that may result from such seemingly successful initiatives as the implementation of the *Pax Augusta*.

LA RICEZIONE VIRGILIANA NELLA *SULPICIAE CONQUESTIO*

La *Sulpiciae Conquestio*, trasmessa come parte degli *Epigrammata Bobiensia*, è un'opera curiosa, ricca di allusioni intertestuali specialmente all'*Eneide* di Virgilio. Un esame attento del suo sviluppo argomentativo rivela che l'autore riflette sulla rappresentazione virgiliana del ruolo della guerra e della pace nella storia romana, enfatizzando come la pace possa indebolire e corrodere la compagine politica romana. La *Conquestio* si presenta dunque come un commento di età flavia avanzata sui problemi che possono derivare da iniziative apparentemente riuscite come l'attuazione della *Pax Augusta*.

Keywords: Virgil, *Sulpiciae Conquestio*, *Epigrammata Bobiensia*, Augustus, Intertextuality

Parole chiave: Virgilio, *Sulpiciae Conquestio*, *Epigrammata Bobiensia*, Augusto, Intertestualità

Slowa kluczowe: Wergiliusz, *Sulpiciae Conquestio*, *Epigrammata Bobiensia*, August, intertekstualność



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Introduction

The subject of our study is a curiosity, a riddle seemingly devoid of cypher. The so-called *Sulpiciae Conquestio* is one of the more mysterious texts to be found in the last volume of Baehrens' (1879: 90–97) collection of minor Latin poetry, a work that had in fact been the subject of his *Habilitationsschrift*.¹ In more recent years, it has been the subject of renewed interest, together with the other poems of the collection that has come to be known conveniently as the *Epigrammata Bobiensia*.² Of the poems from this relatively brief corpus, the lengthiest is the hexameter poem lamenting the expulsion of the *philosophi* from Rome under the emperor Domitian.³

The seventy-some verses of the *Conquestio* pose considerable textual problems, not least regarding possible *lacunae*. These difficulties render interpretive investigation difficult, and any analysis of the poem as a whole must be provisional. That said, what survives allows for a profitable foray into a significant and largely unappreciated specimen of Virgilian reception. We shall consider the *Conquestio* as an intriguing composition that is both laden with intertextual connections to the *Aeneid*, and provocative in the implicit commentary it seems to offer on certain aspects of Virgil's epic, not least with respect to his depiction of the discussions of the immortals regarding the destiny of Rome, and his use of apian imagery as metaphor for urban development. In the end, we shall see that Sulpicia's satire may be read as a supplement (not to say correction) to Virgil, exploring and expanding on ideas raised by the Augustan poet in his musings on the nature of Rome and her expansion. Our method will be to offer a close reading of the poem, highlighting key passages that illustrate the author's engagement with Virgil.

The poem and its opening

"While not an undiscovered masterpiece, the work (as far as we can tell given the wretched condition of the text) is competent and effective, and there seems to be no sound reason why it should not be taken at face value, as a work written by the same Sulpicia, wife of Calenus, who was known to Martial."⁴ We concur

¹ I am grateful for the assistance of the editor, and for the comments of the two anonymous reviewers, whose corrections and suggestions greatly improved this work.

² For the text, note Speyer 1963, and Rampioni 1982. On the transmission, see Portuese 2017, 2020: 199–203, and *Gli Epigrammata Bobiensia nel carteggio fra Augusto Campana e Franco Munari (1952–1956)* 2023.

³ The posthumous work of Butrica (2006) provides an excellent introduction.

⁴ See Butrica (2000). This invaluable internet resource offers a critical text, with introduction and some annotation; the same editor has a translation and notes available on the *Diotima* website (also 2000). For the Calenus of Martial 10.35 and 38, see *ad loc.* Macara 2007.

with this conclusion of Butrica, accepting the *Conquestio* as a surviving text of the period not long after the violent end of Domitian's principate.⁵ Others would take it to be a specimen of later, even late antique poetry, with the resultant need to consider why the (unknown) author would seek to don a Domitianic mask.⁶ While our arguments about the poem's engagement with Virgil do not depend on its date or provenance, it is important to keep in mind that the *Conquestio* may offer an interesting insight into how the *Aeneid* was being read (at least by one learned mind) at a notably pivotal moment in Roman history.⁷

Sulpicia's poem manages to cover an immense amount of ground in short compass; apart from the pervasive intertextual allusions to earlier Latin verse, there is also an impressive array of historical citations and remarks about contemporary affairs, including a remarkable attack on the *princeps* that is redolent with the spirit of contempt for Domitian's perceived hypocritical attitude toward sexual peccadilloes.⁸ The opening verses (1-11) announce that Sulpicia will use the heroic meter, notwithstanding the fact that she is essaying to compose a *fabella pacis* (2).⁹ Dactylic hexameter is connected with both *heroas* and *arma* in the poem's opening verse (*Musa, quibus numeris heroas et arma frequentas*); from the start, we may be reminded of the world of the *Aeneid*, the epic of arms and the man. This satire will take the theme of that poem in markedly different directions. Rather than engage in epic parody in the nature of works such as Alexander Pope's *Dunciad*, Sulpicia's composition will commence where its inspiration ended, and it will offer an appendix of sorts to its *dénouement*. The *Aeneid* forecasts the Augustan Peace, even as the resolution of the war in Latium comes in the violent finale of the epic that leaves the reader on a note of furious violence; Sulpicia's *Conquestio* will be a story about Peace, with contrast and comparison between its benefits and those of war.

One of the striking features of the opening of Sulpicia's poem is that it does not offer clearly defined parameters for its subject. A "little tale of peace" is announced, albeit one that will be sung in martial meter. We are left uncertain as to what exactly the poet intends to do. What follows at once (12-17) does not clarify the nature of her planned *fabella*, though it poses a provocative question, as Calliope is asked to tell of what Jupiter is planning to do. Does he intend to reverse history, and to return humanity to the days when acorns and pure draughts

⁵ On the many mysteries surrounding this shadowy figure, note Merriam 1991: 303–305; Parker 1992: 89–95; Richlin 1992: 125–140, and cf. Jędrzejczak 2009: 693–695.

⁶ Cf. here Ballaira 1975: 399–402.

⁷ For the historical background of the age, see especially Jones 1993, and Grainger 2004. On the poetry of the age, note Thiele 1916: 233–260; for the possible place of Sulpicia in the opposition to Domitian, note Ballanti 1954: 75–95, especially 84–92.

⁸ Cf. here Charles, Anagnostou-Laoutides 2010: 173–187.

⁹ Passages from the *Conquestio* will be referenced from Butrica's text, with mention of divergences from Baehrens' Teubner, *et al.*

of water constituted a natural diet?¹⁰ There is a hint here of the Golden Age, when man lived on the food that was seemingly spontaneously produced by nature.¹¹

But there is no idyllic picture, no scene of simpler, more tranquil times as something to be longed for or desired. At once, the poet clarifies the darkness of her theme, with another alternative question: *an reliquas terras conservat amicus et urbes, / sed genus Ausonium †Romulique† extirpat (?) alumnos?* (18-19). The textual problems here are vexing, though the meaning is relatively clear; Sulpicia is distinguishing between foreign cities and Rome.¹² *Extirpat* is Baehrens' suggestion for the manuscript reading *exturbat*, and certainly gives better sense (Butrica translates it), though it is not readily apparent how the error might have arisen. Despite these appreciable difficulties, it is possible to note several interesting points. Jupiter is cast in the role of benefactor or malefactor with respect to diverse cities; some are accorded blessings, while others suffer appreciable harm. Rome is identified with the *genus Ausonium*, the Ausonian race that in the final colloquy and reconciliation scene of Jupiter and Juno in the *Aeneid* was joined corporally but not culturally with the Trojans.¹³

To the degree that Saturn is associated with the Golden Age, Jupiter may be seen as embarking on a course of abandoning Rome to the comparatively primitive days of his father's rule.¹⁴ The supreme god is accused of depriving the Ausonians of the blessings of civilization. And yet the Saturnian Golden Age was golden in large part because it was associated with peace. Sulpicia announced an irenic story, a *fabella pacis*; not even twenty verses into the surviving text, we find an odd juxtaposition of past and present, and the implicit question of what, exactly, are the blessings of civilization. Certainly Sulpicia invites the reader of her satire to ponder the implications of the Golden Age. At least in one of Sulpicia's alternatives for what is happening, Rome is envisaged as moving back in time, as reverting to her primitive self; progress in the arts and sciences seems to be at risk, and the point seems to be that reliving the Golden Age of freedom from labor and the reaping of the benefits of peace, if it means that man's great advances are to be lost.

Heroism and war

And yet there is an undeniable, indeed palpable tension here, given the immense blessing that peace would seem to bring (not least the ability to have untroubled time for scientific and philosophical undertakings). Sulpicia proceeds to

¹⁰ For such rustic fare see Campbell 2003: 202–203, and *cf.* Straub 2019: 281–285.

¹¹ On this theme see further Garani 2022: 145–163, 157.

¹² Butrica wondered if *lupulaeque* might be the true reading to resolve the daggers of desperation, a brilliant and daring conjecture (especially with *alumnos*) that is superior to *Remulique*, *Romlique*, and the other suggested corrections for the unmetrical manuscript text.

¹³ *Cf.* 12.820–42, with Traina 2017 (reprint of the 2004 second edition), *ad loc.*

¹⁴ See further here Baldry 1952: 83–92; Wallace-Hadrill 1982: 19–36; Perkell 2002: 3–39 and Gardner 2023: 63–81.

articulate the two key elements in the advance of Rome: (...) *duo sunt quibus ex-tulit ingens / Roma caput, virtus belli et sapientia pacis* (20-21).¹⁵ Here the satirist recalls a celebrated, solemn moment from the encounter of Aeneas with the shade of his father Anchises in the underworld of Book 6 of the *Aeneid*. The Roman of the future is addressed, with reference to the particular arts that distinguish his people (6.851-3 *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento / (hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem, / parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*).¹⁶ It is a curious statement, one that has elicited appreciable critical attention; the arts of peace and of war are juxtaposed, with the Roman depicted as master of both, knowledgeable as if he were a student of *Ecclesiastes* as to the proper time for each.¹⁷ The wisdom of peace bespeaks the sense of knowing when to practice the serene arts; the Roman is capable of exercising the brilliant display of both war and its antonym.¹⁸

Butrica transposes verses 32-34 here, so that Sulpicia offers comment on Rome's reliance on *virtus belli* and *sapientia pacis*, with direct quotation of one of the most famous passages in the *Aeneid*:

stabat in his, neque enim poterat constare sine ipsis,
aut frustra uxori mendaxque Diespiter olim
'imperium sine fine dedi' dixisse probatur.

The durative imperfect describes well the continued state of Roman imperial power; if Rome did not have her martial acumen and irenic wisdom as signal qualities, she would never have been able to forge an empire. Indeed, Diespiter would have spoken of *imperium sine fine* to his wife in vain. The quote from *Aeneid* 1.279 is wrongly said to have been a remark of Jupiter to Juno, an error that has invited emendation to *Veneri*.¹⁹ Virgil's verse proceeds to read (...) *quin aspera Iuno*; Sulpicia could, one imagines, have made a slip.

But the passage is more interesting if *uxori* is exactly what the satirist intended to write, knowing full well her Virgilian intertext. In context, the promise of *imperium sine fine* is given by Jupiter to Venus as part of the pronouncement of

¹⁵ As Butrica notes in his commentary (n. 13), "all modern editions of the *Conquestio*... incorporate a transposition of the original lines 16-18 as transmitted to after 19 (and, unfortunately, renumber the lines accordingly, so that they are now numbered 20-22)." He proceeds to offer reasonable speculation for dislocations in this section of the text. Butrica also punctuates verse 16 as *quid reputemus? enim* (...), rather than *quid? reputemus enim: duo*, etc.; the distinction does not impinge on our analysis of the passage.

¹⁶ For the text see Conte 2019 (*editio altera*); for commentary *ad loc.*, note especially Horsfall 2013.

¹⁷ Zetzel (1989: 263-284) offers a fine introduction to the challenges and riches of these verses.

¹⁸ The collocation *sapientia pacis* occurs only here in extant Latin; it is a characteristically bold, highly compressed phrase of the poet.

¹⁹ On the sentiment of boundless imperial expansion cf. here Ferguson 1975: 167 ff., and Kerrigan 2020: 31-34. "Convenient, facile: this is a 'well-packaged' prophecy!" (Lyne 1987: 81).

a prophecy that is meant to soothe her anxious concern for the plight of Aeneas and his Trojans. Priam's Troy had been destroyed, thus offering a pointed, potent contrast with the sentiments of endless empire.²⁰ What Venus is not made aware of, however, is the climactic agreement agreed to by Jupiter and Juno toward the end of the epic.²¹ The referential dative *uxori* is a brilliant nod to the "correction" offered to Venus' understanding of Jupiter's announcement from *Aeneid* 1.²² Venus incorrectly assumes that *imperium sine fine* is addressed as much to the Trojans of the present as to the Romans of the future. Jupiter is not mendacious in his rendition of the future to his daughter, though one imagines that if she were present for the colloquy of *Aeneid* 12, she would call her father a liar (Sulpicia's *mendax* is richly connotative). There is no neat, simple equation between Trojan and Roman; the future is written with crooked lines. Sulpicia's error serves to encapsulate the salient prophetic passages from the first and last of the books of Virgil's epic; Jupiter had said *Teucris subsident* (12.836), and indeed the Teucrians are nowhere in Sulpicia's satire, with *uxori* and not *Veneri* purposefully alluding to the reconciliation of the goddess who at 1.279b is *aspera*, while at 12.841 she is *laetata*.

Textual problems aside, we may continue to wonder in what direction the poet is directing her musings. We had been told that there would be a *fabel-la pacis*; now we learn of two lynchpins of Roman *imperium*, namely heroic virtue in war and the wisdom of peace. Looming over all is the question of whether Jupiter intends to return Rome to a primitive state, one that is associated both with peace and with the absence of the *artes* of civilization that we have come to cherish. There is a tension here, a marked dichotomy. In Virgil, the shade of Anchises spoke of a Roman future with a call to mastering both the art of *debellare superbos* and *parcere subiectis*. But for any people, it is a delicate balancing act indeed to live poised between war and peace, and Roman history was replete with examples of disasters (both domestic and foreign) that involved the art of war.

Roman history

Sulpicia proceeds to allude to events from Roman history, as she expands on the concept of *virtus*. The text is once again problematic. Baehrens prints *sed virtus, agitata domi, socialibus armis / in freta Sicaniae et Carthaginis exilit arces / ceteraque imperia, et totum simul abstulit orbem* (23-25). Butrica offers the con-

²⁰ See further here Rossi 2004: 36. "Empire" is a fair word for conveying the sense, though it is not technically correct; cf. Conway 1935, *ad loc.*

²¹ The significance of the goddess' virtual disappearing act from the poem's close is considered in detail by Fratantuono (forthcoming in *Hermathena*).

²² For a learned consideration of the development of attitudes toward the immortals in relationship to imperial ideology from Virgil to the Domitianic Age, note Pontiggia 2021: 158–170.

jecture *Latialibus* for *socialibus*, arguing that chronologically an allusion to the Social War cannot precede mention of Roman imperial adventures in Sicily, North Africa, and beyond.²³ The heart of the matter may be the significance of *agitata domi*. Certainly the point seems to be to reflect on Roman military tensions and violence at home, before proceeding to overseas engagements; Rome went abroad on martial adventures after effecting a union of previously discrete, sometimes warring peoples of the Italian peninsula. Not everyone will be convinced that *socialibus* must refer to the *Bellum Sociale* of the days of Marius and Sulla; it is possible that the highly compressed language is meant to evoke the simple point that a history of tensions in Italy gave way to unity and embarkment on foreign adventures. We have noted that Troy is suppressed in this historical *précis*; in *socialibus armis* there may be a reminder of the long history of conflicts in Italy that predated any overseas wars.²⁴ To the degree that we remember that bloody, internecine strife has recurred now and again throughout Roman history (including in the events of the Long Year A.D. 69 that resulted in the coming to power of the Flavians), so much the better: the reader of the satire has been told that there will be a story of peace; for now, we are mired in the memory of war.

In freta Sicaniae: the language is Virgilian, recalling when the Trojan herald Ilioneus told Dido that if Aeneas were dead and there were no hope left of finding him, there was at least a home for the Teucrians in Sicily: *at freta Sicaniae saltem sedesque paratas* (*Aeneid* 1.557). For Virgil, the emphasis in both *Aeneid* 1 and 5 is on how Sicily has long had a connection to the proto-Romans; later imperial expansion could be cast as a homecoming of sorts. *Abstulit orbem*: Roman triumphs abroad seized or took away the world. The language is not entirely complimentary or auspicious; it is carefully chosen to invite reflection on the inherent tension.²⁵

The problem is now clarified, as we learn what exactly Sulpicia wants to focus on in her rendition of a *fabella pacis*. The longer Rome remains in a state of peace, the more stagnant she becomes; to the degree that there is nothing less to conquer, there is an ever more enervating languor that comes over her. As the meditation proceeds, the language is fraught with more difficulties of text, punctuation, and interpretation.²⁶ Verses 25-26 introduce a comparison between Rome and a victor in the Greek stadium; 26 *languet et immota secum virtute fatiscit* offers powerful verbs in framing position, with further reflection on *virtus*. The precise point of

²³ Hockings (2021: 878–887) accepts Butrica's conjecture, while also suggesting *arvis* for *armis* (for better balance with *domi* in particular).

²⁴ This theme will be developed at verse 63, when Domitian's Sabine origins are evoked.

²⁵ In Virgil's epic the same verb form is used in several ominous contexts (of both death and cosmic disturbance): cf. 3.198-9 *involvere diem nimbi et nox umida caelum / abstulit* (...), 6.428-9 *quos dulcis vitae exsortit et ab ubere raptos / abstulit atra dies et funere mersit acerbo*, 11.27-8 *mittatur Pallas, quem non virtutis egentem / abstulit atra dies et funere mersit acerbo*, and 11.814 *haud secus ex oculis se turbidus abstulit Arruns*.

²⁶ Butrica has extended, helpful notes on 25 ff.

solus in 25 has been rightly questioned, but Sulpicia may simply be underscoring the notion that Rome is like an athlete who has defeated all challengers; the emphasis of the metaphor is on the victor who still has unshaken courage (*immota virtus*), though there is nothing left to do, and so *languere* and *fatiscere* are the perfect verbs to describe the consequences of inaction. The comparison is rendered more effective by the fact that Rome conquered the Greeks. The conqueror is like a victorious athlete of the now defeated, once glorious victors; the Greek athlete became steadily weaker once bereft of new foes, like Rome.

Pacific enervation

After mentioning *virtus*, Sulpicia also references *pax*, as she underscores the point: *sic itidem Romana manus, contendere postquam destitit et pacem longis frenavit habenis* (27-28).²⁷ Once again the language strikes a jarring, discordant note. The Roman *manus* has ceased to contend with challengers, and it has curbed peace with long reins.²⁸ It is as if *pax* is something that needs to be put in check, something that is potentially harmful if it is allowed free rein. This is not Virgil's Aeolus with his ferocious winds, or his Madness that will be chained in the Augustan Peace; this is a complicated athletic metaphor, in which the victor stands alone in the stadium, having ceased to struggle and having restrained peace. The victorious athlete languishes, fainting away even as his *virtus* remains intact. *Pax* has been bridled, as if it were some noble steed to be ridden and mastered. Personified Peace, it would seem, is an elusive goddess, one that must be caught and restrained in order to be held for an appreciable time.²⁹

Near the midpoint of the extant satire, Sulpicia clarifies the game, just in time to spring a surprise on her reader. Peace is a mixed blessing; a nation like Rome cannot thrive for long without a challenge. "There are no more enemies" is not a happy refrain for a nation that is founded on both the *sapientia pacis* and the *virtus belli*. The uneasy relationship between the opposing qualities is characteristic of Rome; the twin pillars of Roman greatness coexist in a tense dichotomy. War is destructive, but so is a long peace.

The metaphor of the Greek athlete is followed by a reference to *Graia inventa* (29), the Greek discoveries that an extended period of tranquility has afforded Rome the opportunity to study. Contextually, war and peace are interestingly juxtaposed, as Sulpicia describes the actions of the *Romana manus*:

²⁷ Butrica notes *ad loc.* that Virgil has *Ausonia manus* (*Aeneid* 8.328); the language emphasizes the warlike valor of the Romans (his rendering "gang" does not quite capture the elevated tone, but *manus* is difficult to render well).

²⁸ *Romana manus* is from Lucan (*BC* 2.532, 9.258) and Petronius (*Sat.* 5.1.15).

²⁹ It is possible that the satirist is evoking an opposite image from that of Aristophanes' *Pax*, where the goddess Peace is imprisoned by War and must be released.

ipsa domi leges et Graia inventa retractans
 omnia bellorum terra quaesita marique
 praemia consilio et molli ratione regebat. (29-31)

War nets the Romans a number of prizes on both land and sea; these new possessions are ruled continually (*regebat* is another durative, frequentative imperfect) with counsel and gentle reason as the imperial masters review and recall Greek discoveries and the rule of law. The arts of peace allow for *consilium* and *mollis ratio* to be the defining qualities of Roman rule.

Here Sulpicia embarks on intertextual engagement with the famous passage of Horace, *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artes / intulit agrestis Latio* (...).³⁰ The satirical context is not focused on literature *per se* and the advance from Saturnians to hexameters, but on the arts of leadership and the leisure time afforded by peace. Poetry and music may be implicitly referenced, but the emphasis is on how first lands are conquered, and then that they are governed moderately and wisely. It is of a piece with the admonition of Anchises' shade in Virgil.

According to the logic of the satire, peace is enervating and corrosive; Rome has twin pillars, and *virtus belli* is necessary as much as *sapientia pacis*.³¹ The pertinent question here is, how exactly does one balance the two? When does peace in particular begin to cause harm? As for Rome's conquests, Greece is held in special reserve; as in Horace, so in Sulpicia the Greeks are cast in the role of civilizing influencers.³² At what is roughly the midpoint of the poem (we are hampered here in our lack of certainty as to the number and length of any lacunas), the poet turns to her immediate problem, and in shocking style that is meant to work to maximum effect:

nunc igitur qui rex Romanos imperat inter,
 non trabe sed tergo prolapsus et ingluvie albus,
 et studia et sapiens hominum nomenque genusque
 omnia abire foras atque Urbe excedere iussit. (35-38)

Domitian has expelled the philosophers from Rome.³³ The *princeps* is insulted on two counts, the first in passing, the second at greater length and in markedly obscene language.³⁴ He is a king, a *rex* who rules among the Romans; there is no word game or sanitizing of the monarchical nature of his governance. Second

³⁰ *Ep.* 2.1.156-7; the text is taken from Shackleton Bailey 2008.

³¹ There may be a hint in this of the fact that Rome needed Remus as much as Romulus (even if the twins are not to be thought of as emblematic of Peace and War); the fratricide that has bedeviled Rome from its inception is a reminder that twin pillars afford greater security.

³² We may consider again here the question of Troy and its place in Roman origins; notwithstanding the destructive role of the united Greeks in Trojan history, for the Romans Greece is viewed as a fount of civilization and refinement.

³³ Cf. Suetonius, *Vita Domitiani* 10, with Jones 2011, *ad loc.*, and Pliny Minor, *Ep.* 3.11, with Sherwin-White 1966, *ad loc.*

³⁴ On the difficulties of verse 36, note Kuijper 1965: 155–180.

(verse 36), he seems to be condemned for taking the passive role in homosexual acts, and, perhaps, for “the presence of semen in his throat.”³⁵ Portrayed as a tyrant and cast by the satirist in the role of sexual glutton and deviant, Domitian has driven out the very men whose benign influence has contributed to the betterment of Roman society in a time of peace. Peace that lasts too long may be enervating, but this does not necessarily provide sufficient rationale for Domitian’s deed. And even if the *princeps* were doing the right thing, his seeming recourse to old-fashioned, Catonian measures is hypocritical given his personal behavior and character.

Domitian’s action is cast in terms that recall what the poet rhetorically asked about Jupiter at verse 19, when she wondered about the god’s intended treatment of Rome; especially if we read *exturbat* and not Baehrens’ *extirpat*, the sentiment is similar to *excedere iussit* (38) of the emperor’s expulsion of the philosophers. Yet once again, the tensions inherent to Rome’s foundations are on display. Peace weakens the state. Extended peace has led to a time of reflection and refined rule, under the influence of wisdom inherited from conquered Greeks. Domitian’s exiling of the Greek thinkers is portrayed as a negative thing, and yet there is also the question of the damage incurred by an overlong indulgence in peace.

Virgil’s shade of Anchises speaks of how others will be masters of the visual, astronomical, and rhetorical arts, with implicit reference to the Greeks (*Aeneid* 6.847-50). The Romans are to be the masters of government and warfare, of winning battles and of judicious rule. Expelling the philosophers constitutes a bad exercise by Domitian of the practice of Rome’s specialty, and it deprives the *alma urbs* of the chance to profit from the particular provinces of expertise of the Greeks.³⁶

Philosophers and teachers

Sulpicia asks a rhetoric question: did we not conquer the cities of Greece, so that we might be instructed by them (39-40 *quid facimus? Graiorum nonne revicimus urbes / ut Romana foret manus his instructa magistris?*).³⁷ Textual problems abound in this section of the poem, perhaps occasioned by the striking argument that Sulpicia unfolds at 41 ff. The philosophers leaving Rome are compared to the Gauls who were

³⁵ So Butrica; for such an insult against a Roman leader see Fratantuono 2010: 101–110.

³⁶ Sulpicia’s attack on Domitian for alleged sexual deviancy may work on two levels. First, certainly it injects a sudden note of vitriol that deliberately catches the reader unawares. Second, possibly there is an implicit contrast between socially acceptable norms of behavior in Rome *versus* the Greek world, with Domitian lampooned for inconsistency as he expels Greek wise men, while behaving in a manner more associated with foreign than domestic social mores.

³⁷ The text is Butrica’s. As he notes *ad loc.*, there are “substantial difficulties” in the passage. Baehrens prints *quod facinus! Graios Ionumque petivimus urbes, / ut Romana foret magis his instructa magistris*; *quod facinus* and *Graios Ionumque petivimus* are his conjectures for the manuscript readings *quid facimus* and *relinquimus*. Butrica combines three conjectures to make sense of a desperately mangled text (see further his notes here).

evicted from the Capitol by Camillus and Manlius Capitolinus (41-44).³⁸ Sulpicia rhetorically concludes that evidently where Scipio Aemilianus Africanus (the conqueror of Carthage) must have gone astray was in seeking Greek tutelage (45-46).

What follows is exceedingly difficult to construe given the state of our text. Verse 47 seems to refer to other men of Scipio's age, men who also frequented the lectures of Greek philosophers. Verses 48-50 introduce Marcus Porcius Cato, who is said in some sources to have been like Domitian in favor of expelling philosophers from Rome.³⁹ Any interpretation of this section of Sulpicia's satire is rendered acutely provisional and problematic given our lack of certainty as to the text, especially the probable lacuna after verse 48. The key point that emerges, however, is the search for a solution to the aforementioned problem of the uneasy juxtaposition of war and peace in Roman society:

scire deos magni fecisset utrumne secundis
an magis adversis staret Romana propago. (49-50)

The conjecture *adeo* for *deos* helps to make the passage easier to understand, but the general sense is reasonably clear in any case. If there is a problem to be solved by a philosopher, it is the question of whether peace or adversity is better for the Roman stock.

The satirist's conclusion is given at once: *scilicet adversis* (51). Cato, perhaps, wanted to know the answer to the problem of peace *versus* war; he wanted a clearly defined rationale for knowing when circumstances called for the exercise of Rome's *virtus belli* or *sapientia pacis*. Sulpicia gives what she considers to be the evident (*scilicet*) answer that the philosophers did not offer: *res adversae* are best for Rome; paradoxically, Rome is most secure and most stable when she is at war and in serious straits.

Bees and wasps

Suadet amor patriae (52): love of one's country motivates responding nobly and heroically to external threats.⁴⁰ Textual problems recur; verses 53 ff. introduce a bee comparison, the exact details of which are uncertain. The bees are clearly the Romans, and the point seems to be that when the bees are actively responding to a threat, they are at their best. When they return to the hive free from care, then a period of peril

³⁸ Again, following Butrica's corrected text, and reading the "Capitolinus" of verse 41 as a discrete individual (i.e., Marcus Manlius Capitolinus), not as an epithet of Camillus.

³⁹ See here the invaluable, nuanced discussion of Astin (1978: 168-169) on the evidence of Plutarch and Pliny Maior.

⁴⁰ The phrase *amor patriae* may be inspired by Virgil, *Aeneid* 11.892, in a scene of defense of one's city that is parallel to the present context.

commences on account of their inactivity (55 *ast ubi apes secura redit* (...). What exactly wasps are doing in the comparison, let alone the temple of Juno Moneta (53), is uncertain.⁴¹ The temple was built on the Capitoline, and had been vowed by Camillus; its location was on the citadel, allegedly on the site of the home of Manlius.⁴² It is possible that Baehrens' reconstruction of the imagined scene is correct: wasps attack a hive, like the Gauls besieged the Capitol. This is accurate biology; wasps will strike a hive, seeking both honey and protein. If wasps are successful in stealing food, the surviving bees will starve, even if they survive the assault.

Bees play a significant role in Virgil's *Aeneid*, in key passages from the framing books of the two halves of the epic, 1 (430-436) and 6 (707-709), 7 (64-67) and 12 (587-592).⁴³ In *Aeneid* 1 the bees are the Carthaginians, busily at work on their new city. In 12 the bees are the Latins in Latinus' capital, at risk of being attacked by Trojan city. In 6 the bees are the souls in Elysium, awaiting rebirth; in 7 the bees may be associated with the Trojan swarm that seeks refuge in Latium. Apian imagery serves as a quasi-anchor in Virgil's epic, as we move from the Trojan sojourn in Carthage to Aeneas' arrival in Latium. In Dido's realm, there is talk of the impossible, namely of the Trojans sharing a polity with the Carthaginians. In Latinus' realm, the question is the process by which Trojans and Italians will form one polity, and (crucially) whether said polity will be Trojan or Italian in *sermo* and *mores*.

Sulpicia's Romans are bees defending their hive from wasps; the hive is associated closely with the goddess who departed the immortal stage in a state of rejoicing in Virgil's *Aeneid* (12.841). Victory is achieved by an apian display of *virtus belli*. Restored to a state of *longa pax*, the bees become fat on their own honey, as it were. The languid bees are not vigorous and energetic. The satirical bees are like the Romans defending the Capitol from the Gauls; whether right or wrong, Domitian's action with respect to the Greek philosophers is nothing like the heroic deeds of the fourth-century Romans.

Cloying honey

The poet's conclusion is that long peace is destructive: *plebs<que> patresque una somno moriuntur obeso: / Romulidarum igitur longa et gravis exitium pax* (56-57). The metaphorical image is again one of gluttony, as in the attack on

⁴¹ It is possible that Sulpicia intended her reader to think of Aristophanes' *Vespae*, especially in connection with musings on the relationship of Rome with the Greek world.

⁴² Cf. Livy 7.28.4-6, with Oakley 1998, *ad loc.*, and Ovid, *Fasti* 6.183-90, with the notes of Littlewood 2006.

⁴³ In *Georgics* 4, bees are introduced in connection to the question of rebirth and regeneration (cf. the Bugonia), and in association with the specter of civil war (cf. *G.* 4.88-102, where the battling king bees may allegorically represent Antony and Octavian). On bees in Augustan imagery note Boas 1938: 141-142.

Domitian; the picture is reminiscent of a scene of fatigue and slumbering satiety after a heavy repast. Given the bee imagery, there is probably a hint of the cloying, sickeningly sweet experience of overindulgence in honey. The result of this state of lethargy is that the bees die (*moriuntur*).

But is it not the case that there was long peace both before and after Domitian expelled the waspish Greeks? We are left with the question that perhaps the Greek philosophers could have answered, had they been allowed to remain in Rome: how does one know when it is time to balance *sapientia pacis* with *virtus belli*? Sulpicia promised a *fabella pacis*, and the grim conclusion that has unfolded is that it is *pax* and not *virtus* that is the greater problem. Certainly constant warfare poses perils and may incur heavy, even grievous losses. But *pax* may be a more dangerous state: of Rome's twin pillars, peace may be the more unstable support; its destructive force operates slowly and silently. To the degree that Domitian's principate may have been marked more by defensive than by offensive warfare, the satirist's subject of peace *versus* war may have had heightened topical relevance. Any peace settlements viewed as particularly shameful or cowardly would have elicited a mocking reaction like Sulpicia's.⁴⁴

Hoc fabella modo pausam facit (58): the little tale of peace ended in this manner, on a note of ruin.⁴⁵ The last dozen verses of the extant poem offer a stunning coda, one which poses an array of exegetical difficulties, not least on account of the state of the text. In his notes *ad loc.*, Butrica calls lines 59-63 "perhaps the most desperately corrupt passage (...) in the entire poem." The poet addresses the Muse, and seems to ask if it is a pleasing time now to leave Rome. The textual corruption does not permit anything approaching certainty, but it is possible that there is a reference to how once the Lydians left their home, an allusion to the story famous from Herodotus of migration from western Asia Minor to Tyrrenia (1.94).⁴⁶ If not this option, the Muse is asked to choose something else (that is, other than leaving), provided that Rome be kept a happy place for her husband Calenus, and that the Sabines be kept away (63 [...] *pariterque averte Sabinos*). Here we find a clear enough allusion to Domitian's origins, and with biting satirical force: the Sabines were stereotypically associated with old-fashioned virtue and morality, qualities quite foreign to this particular Sabine (at least in the estimation of the hostile satirist).⁴⁷

⁴⁴ See further Jones 1992: 127 ff. This is a general assessment, given that Domitian's reign was marked by significant expansionist efforts in Britain and Germany in particular. "The reconstruction of Domitian's foreign policy is rendered difficult by the rampant distortion of his actions by hostile sources." (Galimberti 2016: 92-108, especially 97 ff.). Cf. also Levick 1982: 50-73.

⁴⁵ The noun *pausa* is not particularly common in the extant verse of any period; an old word, it is found in Plautus and Lucretius, but otherwise only once in Manilius.

⁴⁶ On which see Dewald, Munson 2022, *ad loc.* Cf. Virgil, *Aeneid* 8.479-80, and Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.55.

⁴⁷ See further here Cooley 2016: 121-132, especially 122-123.

Domitian and Roman identity

The Muse gives assurances to her devotee: a plot looms over Domitian (64-66).⁴⁸
The very end offers a powerful close:

nam laureta Numae fontisque habitamus eosdem
et comite Egeria ridemus inania coepta.
vive, vale. manet hunc pulchrum sua fama dolorem:
Musarum spondet chorus et Romanus Apollo.

A dazzling array of storied figures is convoked, as Calliope offers a glimpse of the future. The Muses inhabit the groves and springs of Numa; together with the water nymph Egeria, they mock Domitian's empty, pointless initiatives.⁴⁹ In 69 *manet hunc pulchrum sua fama dolorem*, there may be an allusion to the once attractive appearance of the *princeps*, now deformed by age and luxurious living.⁵⁰ This consoling declaration about the doomed Domitian is a promise of the chorus of the Muses, and of "Roman Apollo" (Muses and god frame the final verse). Apollo was an eminent Trojan patron, and a god of music and the arts; the satire ends on a note of his effective transformation from benefactor of Troy to patron of Rome. It is a resounding note of triumph, not a celebration of Apollo's oversight of the Augustan victory of Actium, but a promise by the divine patrons of the arts that Domitian is soon to have nothing more than a terrible reputation as recompense for the pain he has inflicted on Rome. There are shades here of elements of the Augustan program, however. We may remember the association of Apollo with the victory over Cleopatra and Antony, and, too, the conscious efforts of Augustus to be seen as a new Numa.⁵¹

If we recall also Romulus' conflict with the Sabines and the legendary manner of its resolution, a rich circuit of allusions is evoked in brief compass, with a twist on the famous tale. Sulpicia makes an appeal for her husband Calenus; casting herself and her spouse as "true" Romans, she pleads that the Sabines may be averted from Rome. The Sabine in this case is the *princeps*, who has acted outrageously in seeking to expel from Rome the Greek philosophers. Under Domitian, Rome has become like a hive of lazy drones, evidently so satiated with honey and in a state of languor that there is nothing better to do than to engage in deviant sexual acts and to drive out the very men who might be able to shed light on Rome's

⁴⁸ At verse 65, the manuscript reading *aequos* is better than Baehrens' conjecture *saevos*, or other attempts to emend; Sulpicia's fears are seen as being just and reasonable. At 66, again the manuscript reading *honore* is superior to any efforts at conjecture.

⁴⁹ On Egeria note the useful overview by Green 2007: 224 ff.

⁵⁰ Cf. Butrica *ad loc.*, who adduces Suetonius, *Vita Domitiani* 18 on the emperor's composition of a work on hair care while he was losing his own.

⁵¹ See further here *Augustus as the New Numa*, in: Luke 2014: 242–260.

age-old problem with the uneasy relationship between *virtus belli* and *sapientia pacis*. Notwithstanding the apparent paradox, peace may be more harmful than war; Domitian's latest action is evidence of that, especially since he is no Cato.

In Virgil's conception, there is a straightforward and yet daunting prescription for the Roman of the future. *Debellare superbos* must be followed by *parcere subiectis*; there is a clearly enunciated sequence that is simple in its logic and difficult in its execution (as evidenced not least by the close of the *Aeneid* and the final encounter of Aeneas with his Rutulian antagonist). Sulpicia proposes something different in her satire. In her *fabella pacis*, Virgil's recipe is amended. Peace may be one of the twin pillars on which Rome has rested, but peace is ultimately enervating and indeed destructive. The admonition of the shade of Anchises is given a codicil, as Calliope makes her own announcement in her address to Sulpicia: *ecce instant odia* (66).⁵² Domitian will be slain in a palace plot; the *odia* that he has incurred will see to his end, and in an intimately civil setting. This violent resolution of the problem is promised by figures usually associated with peace and the serene practice of the arts, namely the Muses and Apollo in his role as god of music.

In Sulpicia's satire, we have noted that mention of the Trojan origins of Rome is suppressed; Romulus is alluded to, not Aeneas.⁵³ Sulpicia's complaint about her age reflects a Roman world that is in line with the significant concessions secured by Juno in Virgil's conception of the origins of Rome's Ausonian and not Trojan *mores*, as reflected in the *de facto* updated, emended version of Jupiter's prophecy to Venus that the poet cites.⁵⁴ The *Sulpiciae Conquestio* laments the numerous problematic aspects of Domitian's reign, but it also offers a disturbing comment on the nature of Rome, one that is carefully conveyed in a densely allusive, relatively brief satire. *Pax* was the dream of the Augustan regime; now *pax* is identified as a corrosive and weakening agent. The Roman bees become lethargic when they are allowed, as it were, to grow fat and lazy on honey, indulging in rest rather than war. Wars can be waged against enemies both foreign and domestic; in the fact that Domitian is Sabine as well as the *princeps*, we are reminded of the conflicts of the earliest stages of Rome's foundation, as well as of the recurrent specter of civil war that has haunted her history.

The end of the *Aeneid* offers the spectacle of a Trojan progenitor of Rome slaying his Rutulian adversary in an act of fury and vengeance; the end of Sulpicia's satire depicts the promise of the Muses and of Roman Apollo that the hatred felt for Domitian will be visited upon him, in clear allusion to his slaying: the Roman bees will be stirred at last from their long languor. Sulpicia's satire draws to a close with a disturbing, implicit reminder. The immediate crisis posed by Domitian's autocratic, deviant behavior will be averted by the expedient of

⁵² The emendation *ecce* for *haec* would seem to be a certain correction here. With *instant odia* cf. Virgil, *Aeneid* 10.904-5 (...) *scio acerba meorum / circumstare odia* (...) (Mezentius to Aeneas).

⁵³ Cf. verses 19 and 57.

⁵⁴ Cf. verses 34-37.

assassination. But the peace that follows will commence anew the cycle of lethargic enervation and soporific overindulgence, as the Roman bees once again become fat on their own honey.

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