

# TWO CONJECTURES IN THE ‘FABELLA SULPICIAE’ (EP. BOB. 37.65–66)

By Maxwell Hardy

**Summary:** Two conjectures are offered on the text of the *Fabella* (or *Conquestio*) *Sulpiciae* (Ep. Bob. 37). It is argued that at v. 65 *aequos* ‘equal, fair, reasonable’ is an anagrammatic corruption of *quaseso* ‘please’, and that at v. 66 *nostro* ‘our’ is a corruption of *nullo* ‘no’.

Interest in the text of the so-called *Fabella Sulpiciae*, a long diatribe against Domitian’s expulsion of philosophers from Rome, has recently been reignited.<sup>1</sup> In this brief article two conjectural emendations are offered at the poem’s close. The text cited below is James Butrica’s reconstruction of the lost archetype (Giovanni Galbiati’s 1493 transcript of an eighth-century MS copied at Bobbio), punctuated in line with modern conventions.<sup>2</sup>

The Muse makes her reply to Sulpicia’s speech:

65            haec ego. tum paucis dea me dignarier infit:  
              ‘pone metus aequos, cultrix mea: summa tyranno  
              haec instant odia et nostro periturus honore est.  
              nam laureta Numae fontisque habitamus eosdem  
              et comite Egeria ridemus inania coepta.  
              uiue, uale. manet hunc pulchrum tua fama dolorem:  
70            Musarum spondet chorus et Romanus Apollo.’

\* I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments.

- 1 See Hockings 2021. The date and authorship of this poem are much disputed: it could be an original poem by the Sulpicia known to us from Martial’s epigrams (10.35, 38), or a fourth-century forgery written in her name at a time when her poems were exciting new interest (cf. e.g. Auson. *Cent. nupt.* p. 153 Green).
- 2 Butrica 2006: 88–99. **B** = Vat. lat. 2836 (*non ante* 1493); **V** = the *editio princeps* of Ep. Bob. 37 (1498); **P** = Ugoletus’ Ausonius (1499); **A** = Avantius’ fourth edition of Ausonius (1507).

64 haec **VP**: nec **B** | dignarier] dignatur et *Pithoeus* || 65 aequos] caecos  
*Hertz*: saeuos *Baehrens*: aegros *Peiper*, *Eskuche suo Marte*: sequor en  
*Withof* | pone metum, cultrix mea: saeuo summa tyranno *Boot* || 66  
 haec] ecce *Heinsius*: hinc *Hertz* | odia] gladii *Butrica*: dira *Hockings* | hon-  
 ore] honori *Burman* || 69 tua] sua *Pithoeus* | dolorem] laborem *Hockings*

So I spoke. The goddess then began to honour me with a brief response: 'Lay aside your reasonable (?) fears, my devotee. The most decided enmity closes in upon the tyrant, and he will perish with our honour. For we inhabit the laurel-groves and fonts of Numa, and with Egeria by our side we mock his vain enterprises. Live long, keep well: your fame awaits this honourable grief. The choir of the Muses and the Roman Apollo promise it.'

The generality of critics agree that *pone metus aequos* 'lay aside your reasonable fears' cannot be what the author of this poem wrote: encouraging someone to lay aside their fears, only to qualify those fears as 'just' or 'reasonable',<sup>3</sup> is not a very effective way to go about setting a nervous person at ease.<sup>4</sup> Baehrens, Hertz, Peiper and Eskuche accordingly exchange *aequos* for a more negative epithet – *saeuos*, *caecos*, and *aegros* respectively – and at least two modern editors print one of these suggestions.<sup>5</sup> However, as *Withof* and *Boot* long ago remarked, the expression *pone metus* (or *metum*) is not usually construed with an epithet qualifying

3 Giordano Rampioni 1982: 59 and Lana 1949: 69 offer 'i tuoi giusti timori'.

4 *Withof* 1799: 136: 'wie kann man von der Furcht das Beiwort *aequos* gebrauchen, und doch sagen, dass man sie ablegen solle?' Baehrens 1873: 36: 'metus aequos, id est, ueros nemo potest iuberi deponere, potest timores quamlibet magnos, dummodo uanos.' The parallels for *metus aequos* adduced by Munari 1995: 95, viz. *Carm. Priap.* 55.4 *iustos ... metus*, *Sen. Contr.* 1.1.11 *iustus metus* and *Ulp. Dig.* 4.2.7.1 *iustus ... metus*, neither confirm the Latinity of *aequos* (as opposed to *iustos*) nor describe *Sulpicia's* fears as 'justified' while also advising her to ignore them.

5 Baehrens 1873: 36; 40 (cf. Baehrens 1883: 96); Hertz 1874: 574; Peiper 1886: 416; *Eskuche* 1890: 388–89. *Butrica* 2006: 101 prints *caecos*, *Fuchs* 1968: 46 *aegros*. The transmitted lection is retained by Lana 1949: 68, Munari 1955: 95, *Speyer* 1963: 47, and Giordano Rampioni 1982: 58.

*metus* (or *metum*).<sup>6</sup> In fact, if a search of the *Musisque Deoque* website can be relied upon,<sup>7</sup> it is not ever so construed, save once in a passage of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, where the epithet refers to qualities not congenial to fear itself: *pulchros, regina, piosque | pone metus*, ‘lay aside, queen, your becoming and pious fears’ (11.389-90). There Ovid’s *pulchros* and *pios* contribute something additional to the sense of *metus*. In Sulpicia, by contrast, it is very far from obvious what meaning is added by *aegros* ‘sick’, *saeuos* ‘cruel’, or *caecos* ‘blind’, that is not already present in *metus* to some degree. As the sense ‘lay aside your fears, my worshipper’ is complete in itself and wants no expansion, I suspect that the corrupted word was a parenthetical one, and this I conjecture to be *quaeso* ‘please’.<sup>8</sup> The gods of the classical pantheon do not normally condescend to such courtesies as ‘please’ or ‘thank you’; but, says Butrica, in this poem ‘Sulpicia is “renewing [her] intimate counsel” with one who knows and recognizes her’ (cf. 3–4 *nam tibi secessi, tecum penetrare retractans | consilium*); and the words of the muse are expressive of this relation in other ways.<sup>9</sup> In v. 69, for instance, Calliope signs off with the friendly valediction *uiue, uale*, ‘live long, keep well’ (also at Hor. *Epist.* 1.6.67). And if, in the same line, Hockings’s *laborem* be accepted for *dolorem* and Pithoeus’ *sua* for *tua*, then the sentence *manet hunc pulchrum sua fama laborem* can be understood as a friendly compliment on the fame-winning excellence of Sulpicia’s verse.<sup>10</sup> If *quaeso* be right, I imagine it will have come to *aequos* by the same anagrammatic process that at Ov. *Her.* 9.20 converted *turpis* into *stupri* and at *Trist.* 1.1.83 changed *argolica* into *agricola*.<sup>11</sup>

6 Withof 1799: 136; Boot 1868: 17 (whose rearrangement *pone metum, cultrix mea: saeuo summa tyranno*, does not appeal for metrical elegance). For *pone metus* without an epithet, cf. Ov. *Am.* 3.6.61-62, *Met.* 1.736, 15.658, *Pont.* 3.3.83, *Stat. Theb.* 3.713, 9.895, *Silv.* 2.1.183, and Hil. *Pict. Macc.* 86. For *pone metum* without an epithet, cf. [Tib.] 3.10.15, Ov. *Her.* 16.68, 20.1, *Ars am.* 1.556, *Rem.* 544, *Met.* 3.634, 5.226, *Fast.* 2.759, *Tr.* 5.2.3, *Stat. Theb.* 11.727, and Maxim. *Eleg.* 3.60.

7 Mastandrea et al. 2007.

8 For *pone* combined with a word equivalent to ‘please’, cf. Ov. *Met.* 14.762 *pone, precor, fastus*; *Stat. Silv.* 2.6.103 *pone, precor, questus*; and Sil. *Pun.* 9.350 *pone, precor, lacrimas*.

9 Butrica 2006: 115.

10 Hockings 2021: 885.

11 For the latter corruption see Owen 1889: 6 n. 83; and for a very long list of similar anagrammatic errors, see Housman 1903: lviii-lix; Willis 1972: 81-87.

The second problem that I wish to discuss arises from v. 66. The statement *et nostro periturus honore est* is of dubious meaning. Baehrens took it in the sense ‘honore, quem semper nobis Romani habuerunt habentque, eueniet ut in iram indignationemque accensi tyrannum tollant’.<sup>12</sup> That is, he took *nostro ... honore* as causative: ‘by the honour which the Romans have for us [sc. Calliope], he [sc. Domitian] will be made to perish.’ This is a rather odd notion, for why should the Romans’ respect for Calliope impel them to depose an emperor? Surely they had more pressing reasons to remove him?<sup>13</sup> Other critics have sought to extract from *nostro ... honore* the meaning ‘to’ or ‘in our honour’, a sense that might have been more easily conveyed by *honori*, which Burman accordingly conjectured.<sup>14</sup> But this reading, though accepted by Butrica, is open to a similar objection as the last: how could the assassination of an emperor ever bring ‘honour’ to a *Muse*? It is doubtful too whether vv. 67–68 follow from this statement with the clear logic implied by *nam*. This particle has explanatory force, but in no way is the prophecy ‘and he shall perish in honour of us’ explained by the statement ‘for we inhabit the groves and founts of Numa, and with Egeria we mock his vain enterprises’.

The passing of an emperor was usually attended with public displays of respect: a state funeral, dirges, eulogistic orations and so forth.<sup>15</sup> It is notorious that Domitian on his decease received no honours of this kind: *cadauer eius*, Suetonius says, *populari sandapila per uispillones exportatum Phyllis nutrix in suburbano suo Latina uia funerauit* ‘his body was carried out on a pauper’s bier by those who bury the common folk, his nurse Phyllis cremating it at her suburban estate on the Via Latina’ (*Dom.* 17.3).<sup>16</sup> That is to say, Domitian did not die ‘with’ or ‘in’ or ‘to’ or ‘by’ the Muses’ honour; he died emphatically ‘without’ it. If Sulpicia’s *honore* was intended to signify the respect that ought to be accorded to a recently expired emperor, then sound sense in adequate style can be restored if only the text

12 Baehrens 1883: 36.

13 Collins 2009: 79: ‘In Suetonius’ account, Domitian’s *saevitia*, his confiscations of property, his *cupiditas*, and his extreme arrogance made him hated and feared, until “at length he was killed in a conspiracy of his friends, intimate freedman, and his wife”. See Suet. *Dom.* 14.1.

14 Burman 1731: 439.

15 See e.g. Suet. *Aug.* 100.1–4, *Tib.* 75.3, *Claud.* 45.1, *Tit.* 11.1.

16 See also Suet. *Dom.* 23.1.

be made to say something like 'and he shall die *without* honour'.<sup>17</sup> A simple way of doing this would be to read *nullo* 'no' in lieu of *nostro* 'our'.<sup>18</sup> *Nam* then accomplishes the point it was written to make: not only is Domitian deprived of the Muse's honour in failing to receive, say, an epicedion or eulogy, but she even 'mocks' him and his *inania coepta* with the satire which she has inspired Sulpicia to write.

Occasions when *nullus* is collocated with *honor* are too numerous to cite here, but note, in connection with funerals, Lucil. 691 Marx *nullo honore ... nullo funere* and Suet. *Dom. 2.3 defunctumque nullo praeter consecrationis honore dignatus*. For the corruption *nullo* → *nostro* (common in later MSS, owing to the shared abbreviation *n<sup>o</sup>*), see Prop. 1.16.21, where the opposite mistake, *nullo* for *nostro*, is made by the scribe of cod. Leidensis Voss. Lat. 81 (s. xv) (probably, however, in perseveration of *nulla* at the beginning of the line).<sup>19</sup> The likeness of *o* to *u* in the cursive pre-Carolingian minuscule script of Galbiati's exemplar might have abetted the error.<sup>20</sup>

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17 For *honor* in the sense of 'funeral rites', see Mehmel, *TLL* 6.3.2925.23-61.

18 Else, conceivably, *cariturus* for *periturus*: 'and he shall want our honour.' The anonymous reviewer, however, finds *nullo* to be more emphatic, and indeed we have had *caritura* (Peiper's excellent emendation of *captiua*) already in v. 52. To read *cariturus* would also deprive the end of this poem to a reference to Domitian's death, the violence of which is well conveyed by *periturus*.

19 See the apparatus of Richmond 1928: 124.

20 See Butrica 2006: 89 (citing Ferrari 1973: 21 n. 2; 13).

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