

Speech, Silence, and Artistic Expression in the *Pervigilium Veneris*

In this paper, I investigate the narratorial intrusion at the end of the *Pervigilium Veneris*, an anonymous poem of 93 lines likely attributable to the 4th century C.E. (Mandolfo 2008, 28-29, among others), mostly a panegyric to Venus and the rebirth of spring until the narrator's personal voice is expressed at line 89. A reference (86-88) to the sonorous swallow, the metamorphosed form of the Athenian princess Philomela, causes the narrator to lament that he has lost his own voice and that he longs to experience a rebirth and sing like the sparrow (89-92). After analyzing the verbs of speech or silence and their agents throughout the poem, I will argue that the author valorizes the swallow's song precisely because he gives credence to the theme generated by the versions of the Philomela myth found in Sophocles' *Tereus*, Aristophanes' *Birds*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, namely that the ability to communicate is indicative of power, an agency that the poet has not exhibited for almost 90 lines of the poem. I will then provisionally suggest that the *Pervigilium Veneris* is stylistically and thematically indebted to imperial panegyric and this lament for a lost method of personal expression euphemizes a complaint about a lack of artistic inventiveness.

Twelve out of fifteen verbs of speech throughout the poem until line 86 take the powerful Venus as agent (*dicit*, 7; *iussit*, 22; *iussit*, 28; *iussus est* x2, 32; *rogare*, 40; *iussit*, 49; *dicit*, 50; *iussit*, 55; *iussit*, 56; *iussit*, 67; *iussit*, 84); the sheer frequency of forms of the verb *iubere* draw attention to Venus' authority (Najock 1985, 198). Two other speech acts result from Venus' direct order and augment the perception of her power: the nymphs ask Diana to leave the forest in direct speech: *una res est quam rogamus*, 38; and the chattering, raucous swans make their pools resound: *iam loquaces ore rauco stagna cycni perstrepunt*, 85. The last verb of speech is a sort of Alexandrian footnote that characterizes Venus' son as country-born (*dicatur*, 77). In sum,

those fifteen verbs appear in about 16.5% of the first 85 lines of the poem. Then, every line from 86 to 91 (the end of the poem) includes verbs of speech or silence; the former type take the swallow as agent (*adsonat*, 86; *dici*, 87; *queri*, 88; *cantat*, 89) while the latter take the poet or an analogue for the poet (*tacemus*, 89; *tacere*, 90; *tacendo*, 91; *tacerent*, 92).

In this concentration of words about sound versus silence, the narrator places himself in an abject position, inferior to the swallow, whose song indicates a freedom and renewal that the poet has not yet experienced: *quando uer uenit meum?* “When is my spring coming?” (89). In so doing, he empowers the swallow and reifies the perception of Philomela as a vocal agent in her own right. Simultaneously, he draws attention to his own inability to sing, a paradoxical assertion in light of the previous 89 lines of the poem. However, I suggest that he complains about his song’s content rather than singing itself. His poem’s panegyric for Venus evokes the style and content of the kind of imperial panegyric in vogue at the time of the poem’s composition, as evidenced in the *XII Panegyrici Latini*, a body of twelve speeches whose “content...is traditional to the point of being formulaic” (Nixon and Rogers 1994, 21). The narrator in the *Pervigilium* thus seems to long for a moment of poetic inventiveness that will stand out from the uninspired mass, a creation as inventive as that of Ovid’s or Sophocles’ version of the Philomela myth.

Bibliography

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