

In her article “Not Before Homosexuality”, Amy Richlin has this to say about the lack of documents from Ancient Rome written by those who were not high-status men: “the silence is eloquent.”<sup>1</sup> This phrase has stuck with me. As a student of Roman sexuality and an amateur enthusiast of Latin poetry, I frequently find the silence (or perhaps more accurately, the silencing) of the voices of women, passive homosexual men, sex workers, and slaves very frustrating when attempting to understand the Roman sexual psyche and its expression in literature. I have frequently sought to dive into what little we have: my main project for my Latin class this semester was a word-by-word analysis of the poetry of Sulpicia, the only poetry by a Roman woman which survives to us, and that for my archaeology class was an iconographic analysis of the Warren Cup, a beautiful silver artifact which depicts two scenes of sex between men. The present project is my attempt, based on what I have learned in the former projects and others, to imagine the voice of a group on the margins of Roman sexuality; men who desired other adult men, especially in a “passive” sexual context; ie, being penetrated during sex. Roman morality was antithetical to men who sexually desired other adult men, especially those who desired to be penetrated by such men, because penetration was conceived as a polluting, degrading act. Roman literature is rife with invectives against such men – see Juvenal’s *Satire II* for an especially acidic rant. But behind the grossly exaggerated stereotypes depicted there, there were real humans. Inspired by extant Latin love poetry, literature on Roman sexual *mores*, and my own experiences, the poems that follow are my attempt to give life, feeling, and words to an ancient Roman man who desires love from other men.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Richlin. “Not Before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the *Cinaedus* and the Roman Law against Love between Men”, in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, no. 4 (April 1993: 523 - 573), 533.

This poem is the introduction to the series that I have named the “Marcius cycle”, which is written from the private perspective of someone whom the Romans might pejoratively refer to as a *cinaedus*, “penetrated man” – a derogatory state because of the defiling, derogatory nature of penetration, physically or emotionally, by others. When I was writing this poem and creating the persona of the author, I tried to place myself in the shoes of someone for whom the desire would be shameful. I frequently recalled Sulpicia, the only female poetess whose voice reaches us from Classical Rome. In her last poem she tells her lover she wishes to not be “as seething a concern for you as I was seen to have been a few days ago... I abandoned you, alone, yesterday night, desiring to conceal my burning.” Despite her proclamation of shamelessness in her opening poem (“I would not want to entrust anything to sealed tablets, lest anyone might *not* read it sooner than my lover”)<sup>2</sup>, the old Roman values, which pressure women to be modest and lack public lives, creep in. It has often been theorized, based on contemporary descriptions of specifically-colored clothing and arcane signals such as head-scratching (see poem 2 below), that the “*cinaedi*” had a subliminal subculture among themselves. While I think that it is probable that men with these shared desires recognized each other, I thought it would be more interesting, and much more realistic, to write from a perspective which was still influenced by feelings of shame towards such fervent desire for another man. This poem deals with the pressures of Roman manhood after a talented and beautiful “new man” appears in the city.

I.

Marcie, par Hercule, sollers palaestra aequae foroque,	1
notus in Reate, novus in Roma alius homo,	
cum pro me primum clarus prodieris tectus in candidis	
visus Phoebum sit descendisse ab caelesti quadrigis	
praeter lacerti, qui solum Marti potuere iaculatori fuisse.	5
A! dei Romule illius filius, ignoscas filio tuae urbis	
quod iam aspiciens Sabinum, non ego tuae turbae esse,	
viros iratos petentis et tuentis uxores novas, sensi,	
sed Sabinarum; cupiens plus meos oculos retinendo	
rapi atque abduci ad moribus familiaribus locum.	10

*1 Marcius, the equal to Hercules, skilled in palaestra and forum alike,*

*2 Well-known in Reate, another new man in Rome,*

*3 When you first appeared clear before me. draped in bright white,*

*4 It might have appeared that Phoebus had descended from his heavenly chariot*

*5 Except for the upper arms, which could only have been of Mars spear-thrower.*

*6 A! Romulus, son of that god, forgive this son of your city,*

*7 Because beholding then the Sabine, I did not feel to be of your throng,*

*8 Attacking the angered men and defending their new wives,*

*9 But of the Sabine women: I, desiring more than preserving my eyes*

*10 To be snatched off and carried off to a place with familiar ways.*

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<sup>2</sup> Sulpicia, *Elegiae*, translated by author. Accessed via Latin Library.

Lines 1-2: *Reate*, modern Rieti, a town 40 miles northeast of Rome, a historic center for the Sabine people. This and *novus in Roma... homo* confirms that Marcius is a “*novus homo*”, lit. “new man”, a term referring to the dozens of young men from high-status families (*notus*) of the Italian provinces who were sent to Rome to begin careers ending in the Senate.

Lines 3-4: *tectus*, past participle of *tego*, “covered, draped” but also “concealed, guarded”. I combined this with *candidis* meaning “bright white [clothes]”, metaphorically “honest” to refer to the white toga the *novus homo* would wear as a sign of the respectability, which might prevent the narrator from attempting to pursue Marcius, who is both “clothed in white” and “guarded in dignity”. Though being penetrated was certainly worse, penetrating an adult Roman man was considered contrary to normal behavior. *Phoebum*, acc. of *Phoebus*, the most common cult title for the beautiful, cultured male god Apollo, meaning “shining”; similar in meaning to *candidus*. *quadrigis*, abl. of *quadrigae*, a “four-yoked” chariot considered the vehicle of the sun, who was often conflated with Phoebus Apollo in Roman religion. I used these references to indicate that the poet was an aficionado of Greek culture, which was a marker of status in ancient Rome.

Lines 5-6: *Marti iaculatori*, dat. of *Mars iaculator*, begins a shift in the poem from Greek to Roman cultural staples. The comparison of the lusted-after Marcius to Mars, whose names are etymologically related, to Mars, the god who perhaps most represents the Roman standard of powerful masculinity, is a moment where the poet’s attempt to gain dignity about his lust using the refined conventions of love poetry falters, and the world of Roman standards of morality creeps in. A comparison of an especially strong and masculine man to Mars is natural and poetic, but desire for such a man by a man is wrong. *Romule*, voc. of *Romulus*: I chose to make the plea for forgiveness to Romulus both because he is the son of Mars and the archetypal Roman man.

Lines 7-8: *Sabinum* = Marcius. *tuae turbae*: the episode referred to is the Rape of the Sabine Women, in which Romulus and the rest of the Roman men abducts the desirable women of the Sabines, an neighboring Italian tribe, to provide wives for the new city’s mostly male citizens. It is a foundational episode in the cult of Roman masculinity, especially as it relates to the Roman male force as one that subdues foreigners and refuses to respect the will of the conquered.

Lines 9-10: *Sabinarum* is a *feminine* genitive plural, so “Sabine women”. *cupiens*, present active participle of *cupio*, “desiring, lusting”; much stronger than *volens*, “wanting”, and often used of sexual desire. I chose to change the subject of the participle from the characters in the story, as *petentis* and *tuentis* did, to the poet, which is why *cupiens* is nominative singular. *retinendo*, gen. gerund. of *retineo*, which means both “to maintain, preserve” and “to restrain, repress”. I chose a verb to create a double meaning of “more than keeping my eyes”, a set phrase in Latin, and “more than restraining my eyes”, i.e. that his desire was too powerful for him to look away. Line 10 in the context of the myth refers to the Sabine women who, being snatched away by the Romans, are fervently wishing to be snatched back and taken back to their homeland. The narrator, though, wishes to be snatched and led off (by Marcius) to a place which does not really exist; one in which the *mores* will be understanding to him and his sexuality.

This poem, which is written in a more informal, halting style than the flowing poetic convention of the previous, with sentences often extending to the next line, is a poem responding to seeing Marcius walking with a *cinaede notissime*, a “very well-known *cinaedus*”, named Suillius. We are meant to assume Marcius is visiting this man because he can provide *auxilio*, “help” or “assistance”, probably financial, which was very much required by *novi homines*. I wanted to think about all of the different emotions the narrator might experience in such a moment, which certainly disturbs the status quo of the earlier poem in which Marcius is an inaccessible symbol of the poet’s sexuality. The theme of *fama*, lit. “reputation; rumor”, an important Roman cultural concept, is referred to throughout, as well as the poet’s own conception of the community of *cinaedi*. It is not clear whether newcomer Marcius himself is aware of Suillius’s status, but for the poet, it is so well-known that he finds himself wondering about Marcius’s masculinity. A bitter view on masculinity is reached in the poet’s incredulous anger (partially at himself for playing into *fama*-based masculinity, partially at the structure itself), in which two traditional paragons of masculinity, senators and soldiers, are mocked for contradictions of their manhood. Overall it is a poem in which I tried to have the narrator reach a higher state of self-awareness, in which the obsession with appearance of and inherent contradictions within Roman masculinity are exposed after Marcius puts himself in danger after merely associating with a *cinaedus*.

## II.

virem in viris te tulerunt, Marcie, ego et istos credidi	1
non sine causa: quibus mecum dicerunt, fama	
res gravissima. immo, credebam, usque ad Suillum tecum	
vidi: illum, uno digito semper crines conexas scabente!	
alter in caeruleis (quid nescit signum?) alter in candidis solitis tuis	5
ambulabatis: tu oculos capere aut genas rubefacere	
non potui defueris. cave, homo nove: videri cum cinaede notissime	
res periculosissima. senatoribus melius est cum adsociare	
mentulis velut loligines marcidae, aut militibus tergis vite notatis.	
sic fias vir verus sine auxilio nostro infamium.	10

1 They told me you were a man among men, Marcius, and I believed them,  
 2 Not without cause: to those who speak with me, reputation  
 3 Is a very serious matter. Yes, I believed them, until I saw Suillus with you:  
 4 Him, with one finger always scratching at his done-up hair!  
 5 This one in sky-blue (who doesn’t know the signal?), the other in your accustomed white  
 6 You two were walking: to capture the eyes or redden the cheeks  
 7 You could not fail to do. Beware, new man: to be seen with a very noted sodomite  
 8 Is a very dangerous matter. Better it is to associate with senators  
 9 With dicks just like wilting squids, or with soldiers with backs marked by the vine.  
 10 Thus may you become a real man, without the help of us disreputables.

Lines 1-2: *vir* is somewhat of a loaded term in the studies of Roman masculinity: a much stronger term than *homo*, it brings to mind an adult man who exercises absolute power over himself and all those who are not *vir*, especially wife, children, and slaves. I chose to begin the poem with this word because it establishes a contrast between Marcius and the *cinaedi*. *tulerunt* is a form of *fero*, lit. “to bear”, but often has the sense of “to be spoken of”. *istos* = masc. acc. pl. of *iste*, “that/those”, with a derogatory connotation. I chose this word because of the sense of self-inadequacy the narrator has over his (and his friends’) sexuality. *fama* is another loaded term, discussed above.

Lines 3-4: The odd act referred to in the exclamation in Line 4 – one finger scratching an arranged hairdo – is referred to throughout Roman literature as a sort of secret code that the *cinaedi* use to identify themselves.<sup>3</sup> I made sure the poem, though, neither confirms nor denies whether it is a “code” for the *cinaedi*, not least a “secret” one; instead, it is referred to as a behavior which confirms Suillius’s sexuality to the citizens of Rome at large.

Lines 5-6: Another line which focuses on Suillius’s “obvious” appearance, this time his wearing of light blue, a very feminine color – who doesn’t know what *that* means, asks the narrator. I harp on this aspect of Roman sexuality, appearance, because it is truly a critical piece of understanding how the Roman sexual psyche operated. As long as a Roman man maintained the appearance of choosing appropriate sexual partners, he would be relatively safe: almost everyone was accused of deviancy, but without a distinct appearance to cap it off, there was no punch behind the slander. Moving through the different stages of Roman sexual life were marked by changes in garb: virgins wore different clothes and hair than wives, as did prepubescent boys and sexually capable young men. It is also an aspect which I personally believe would be an object of fascination within the subliminal community, as it is today in the gay community, in which frequent invectives are leveled against community members who are seen as too obvious or “flaming”. Here the narrator first attempts to distance himself from such a person.

Lines 7-8: In these lines the poet displays a realization of the inherent illogicality of the construction of Roman masculinity. The only “very dangerous thing” about being seen with a noted *cinaedus* is the damage it might do to one’s reputation by association with the visual signals the other displays. The physical or mental condition of Marcius is unrelated, yet he is in great danger because of guilt by association with a random collection of rumors and codes.

Lines 9-10: Senators and soldiers are two archetypal Roman paragons of masculinity, emphasizing political and military power. However, here the poet mocks senators for age-related impotence and soldiers for the fact that they, alone among Roman male citizens, are legally allowed to be beaten – by an army superior using a vinewood staff. He is identifying another problem with Roman masculinity; though a Roman *vir* was supposed to be both completely physically inviolable and sexually dominant over all non-*vires*, the corporal punishments of soldiers and the impotence of the old means that they do not fulfill these categories. Yet they still occupy socially exalted positions (at least theoretically; most soldiers did not hold much individual power) and are never shamed like a *cinaedus*. *infamium*, gen. pl. of *infamis*, “disreputable; infamous, notorious” is the last word of the poem because of the ending focus on the theme of the performative nature of Roman masculinity. The author recognizes that association with his crowd is dangerous because of their social reputation, not actual manhood.

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<sup>3</sup> A very complete list of references in Roman literature to this unexplained phenomenon can be found in a footnote in Kelly Olson’s “Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality: Dandies in Roman Antiquity” in the *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 23, no. 2 (May 2014: 182-205), 182.

This is the last and longest poem in the series and easily the one I struggled with the most. The poem took its present form because I think it is important to not represent the lives of adult men attracted to adult men living in ancient Rome as uniformly miserable. Like every non-sexually normative population in the world, I firmly believe that they enjoyed moments of great joy. This is a poem meant to accompany a sacrifice to Apollo after an encounter with an unnamed man who we can presume is Marcius. I chose to not address or directly refer to Marcius in this poem because I wanted to reference the complex feelings of shock and embarrassment a successful encounter with a man whom the poet respects might have brought up. The writing expresses great gratitude for the intimacy of the encounter, but also much vulnerability bordering on anguish; he wishes only to feel the man's embrace once more, and then he is willing to let him go. I chose to give him this realization, that such love must have been fleeting, to emphasize that joyous moments for his demographic must have been bittersweet, with the knowledge that they must be kept completely secret. The other piece of vulnerability in this poem is the desire of the author to be loved, emphasized in the passive voice of the last word. Such a desire – to receive love from others, rather than to aggressively project one's feelings – was the basic principle of why the *cinaedi* were scorned; it was antithetical to the conquering nature of Roman masculine love. In general, this poem is my attempt to describe a sexual encounter between two adult men in ancient Rome in the context of the incredibly complex feelings it must have brought up.

### III.

O fili gemine Latonae clare, arcitenens Pythonis interfector horribilis,	1
qui colis Deli apricum litus atque antra obscura Delphorum,	
Apollo potens: tibi ego hanc hostiam nunc dedo clam perexiguam.	
si liceret, bucinas tympanaque sonarem et in magna pompa	
pellerem centum elephantes ad limen Pythiae ut multis ex gentibus collectis divitiis	5
adderem maximum: tamen, magister canorum, meum acceptes,	
cum susurris pro paeanibus muribusque testibus. fui nomen tibi, deus,	
sum recordatus quod cum primum prodierit; vultus, cum viserit;	
laus tibi, cum mihi motus risum; gloria tibi, cum invenerint manus meum tergum.	
si licet orare, ille ducat flaminicam, fiat rex silvarum Armeniarum,	10
an sedeat cum tuo, Phoebe, patre: modo me sinas sentire denuo gaudiam	
quae adfuit cum in suum pectus iam tumens iam cadens tenerer.	12

1 O bright twin son of Leto, bow-bearing slayer of terrible Python,  
2 Who tends the sunny shore of Delos and the dark caves of Delphi,  
3 Powerful Apollo: to you I now give this paltry sacrifice in secret.  
4 If it were allowed, I would sound trumpets and drums and in a grand procession  
5 Drive a hundred elephants to Pythia's threshold, that to the riches collected from many nations  
6 I might add the greatest: nevertheless, master of song, accept my offering  
7 With whispers for paeans and mice for witnesses. It was your name, god,  
8 Which I thought of when he first appeared, your face, when he visited,  
9 Praise to you, when I made him smile, glory to you, when hands found my back.  
10 If it is permitted to beg, let that man wed the flaminica, become king of the Armenian forests,  
11 Or even let him sit by the side of your, Phoebus, father: only let me feel the joy once more  
12 Which arrived when, against his chest, now rising, now falling, I was held.

Lines 3-4: After the grand series of titles in the opening couplet, the poet surprisingly reveals the sacrifice is *perexiguam* “paltry, meager, very small” and made *clam* “secretly, stealthily”. This emphasizes an important aspect of the author’s sexuality: that it must be kept secret. Though the poet wishes that he could go on a procession (using language associated with a *triumph* or victory celebration, such as the use of *bucinas*, military trumpets) in his joy, he must make a low-key sacrifice clandestinely. The comparison emphasizes how different the sexuality of the *cinaedi* is from the ideal Roman male, which is victorious, military, and forceful.

Lines 5-6: The “riches collected from many nations” are the Delphic treasures, to which many Mediterranean groups sent gifts which were displayed publicly, a visual symbol of that people’s wealth and multiculturalism. Another image emphasizing how the narrator considers his love something noble, which deserves to be openly shown.

Lines 7-8: The measly circumstances (*susurris, muribus*) behind the sacrifice and the reason for the dedication to Apollo are now revealed; we are brought back to the first poem, to which I directly referenced by repeating the phrase *cum primum prodierit*, “when first he appeared”, which appears in line 3 of Poem 1 in the second person. Marcius is basically confirmed as the man currently being spoken about, as it is he who is compared to Phoebus in line 4 of poem 1, as he is now. *viserit* is the first new event described in the poem: a calling-on or visit, which were common occurrences in the vibrant social scene of ancient Rome.

Lines 9-10: The impersonal nature of the two verbs of line 9 (*motus [sit] risum mihi*, literally “having been made to smile by me”, and *manus invenerint*, “hands found”) was a personal choice by me to communicate the discomfort and vulnerability of being loved *by* a man *as* a man in ancient Rome. The author never mentions a name or even a noun such as *vir* or *homo* here; the only subject is hands. The only cue to the gender of the lover is *motus*, which is a masculine past participle, hidden in the nature of the word. The *flaminica* is the wife of the Flamen Dialis, high priest of Jupiter. They were restricted to the most rigorous taboos in the Roman world; marrying the *flaminica* would be stepping outside of Roman social life. *silvarum Armeniarum* “Armenian forests”; a realm of tigers and barbarians, the lands of the eastern shores of the Black Sea were among the most distant parts of the known world for Romans.

Lines 11-12: *tuo patre*: Apollo’s father is Jupiter, so to sit by his side in heaven would be the ultimate removal from the world of Roman humans. I used the increasing levels of distance expressed by these wishes to display the author’s complex feelings on intimacy vs. relationship. He lacks both, but only intimacy is possible to gain; he recognizes that a true relationship is impossible by claiming he doesn’t care if Marcius is taken out of the realm of Roman society. The only thing he desires is to feel one more time (*denuo*) the joy of being held against *his* (*suum*) rising and falling chest. The appearance of the possessive pronoun here reveals that the feelings are more complex than a desire for simple sexual gratification. It is Marcius, the man whom the author was struck by from the very beginning, who elicits these feelings. The last word of the poem, *tenerer*, the 1st-person singular passive form of *teneo* “to hold”, is a significant word for me. Its passive nature is emphasized – the emphasized last letter and sound of the poem, “r”, turns it into a 1st-person passive construction. The word contains the adjective *tener*, meaning “soft; delicate, sensitive.”

The last couplet is the most intimate one in the collection. I wrote it in the attempt to humanize a group who was grossly stereotyped by surviving Roman authors. It is one which would be heart-wrenching to the author for its vulnerability, against the norms of the time, but also deeply

important, because of its emotive depiction of a rare moment of bittersweet joy for a person on the margins of his society. In this I hope it is representative of this project as a whole.