

A CONJECTURE ON MARTIAL 10,38,12

*ex illis tibi si diu rogata
lucem redderet Atropos vel unam,
malles quam Pyliam quater senectam.* 12

If Atropos, long beseeched, gave you back a single one of them [= those happy days], you would rather have it than four times the Pylian's length of days.¹

rogata ego: rogatam codd.

In Epigram 10,38 Martial sings the praises of the marital bliss which his friend Calenus and his wife Sulpicia have enjoyed for fifteen years, dwelling on the joys of their erotic life. The poem ends with the three lines quoted above.

There has been some controversy about the setting of the poem. Some scholars claim that Sulpicia is dead;² because 10,38 is complementary to 10,35, in which the happy marriage of Sulpicia and Calenus is celebrated from Sulpicia's perspective,³ Fröhlich suggests that 10,38 was not included in the first edition of Book 10 of the Epigrams under Domitian, and that it was added when the book was re-conceived for a second edition under Trajan, which is the version that has come down to us. Others militate against the hypothesis that Sulpicia is dead because of the light tone of the poem and the complete absence of topoi from the consolation literature.⁴ I might add that it would be rather tasteless to dwell on the erotic escapades of Calenus and his dead wife. Courtney⁵ plausibly suggests: "Martial speaks of a marriage of fifteen years, but it does not look, as is sometimes thought, as if Sulpicia has just died; I think that he is celebrating an anniversary."⁶ Be that as it may, it cannot

1) Translation by D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Martial, Epigrams*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA 1993) 363. Similarly e. g. H. J. Izaac, *Martial, Épigrammes*, vol. 2 (Paris 1933) 91: "Ces jours-là, si, cédant à tes prières répétées, Atropos t'en rendait seulement un, tu l'aimerais mieux que de vivre quatre fois l'âge du vieillard de Pylos." and A. Heil, in G. Damschen / A. Heil, *Marcus Valerius Martialis. Epigrammaton liber decimus. Das Zehnte Epigrammbuch. Text, Übersetzung, Interpretationen* (Frankfurt am Main 2004) 156: "Wenn dir von jenen nach langem Flehen Atropos nur einen einzigen zurückgäbe, du hättest diesen lieber als viermal Nestors Alter."

2) See W. Kroll, *Sulpicius* (115), *RE IV A*, 1 (1931) 880; H. Parker, *Other Remarks on the Other Sulpicia*, *CW* 86, 1992, 94–95; U. Fröhlich *ad* 10,35 (in Damschen / Heil [cf. n. 1] 148).

3) See Heil (cf. n. 1) 157–158.

4) See E. Courtney, *The Fragmentary Latin Poets* (Oxford 1993) 361; S. Mattiacci, *Castos docet et pios amores, lusus, delicias facietiasque, ovvero la poesia d'amore secondo l' "Altra" Sulpicia*, *InvLuc* 21, 1999, 222–223.

5) Courtney (cf. n. 4) 361.

6) Similarly G. Vidén, *Women in Roman Literature. Attitudes of Authors under the Early Empire* (Göteborg 1993) 169–170. This interpretation is accepted by Mattiacci (cf. n. 4) 222 and Heil (cf. n. 1) 158.

be doubted that death must play some role because of the verb *redderet* in v. 13, which implies that the happy days are over. In the final three verses of 10,35 it is stated that Sulpicia would not want to live any longer without Calenus (*erepto Caleno*), even if she were to be the wife of Juppiter, Bacchus or Apollo, which is an *adumaton*. The three final verses of 10,38 express the same thought for Calenus in a different but comparable way. Mattiacci⁷ aptly remarks: “(...) come lei non vorrebbe vivere, per quanto moglie di un dio, *erepto Caleno* (10,35,20), lui non vorrebbe barattare uno solo dei giorni del suo matrimonio con la lunghissima vita di Nestore, *erepta Sulpicia*.” I fully agree with Mattiacci but I think that she does not sufficiently take account of the role of death in the final three verses. As noted above, the verb *redderet* points to a setting in which Sulpicia is dead. It is not enough to say that Calenus “would not wish to exchange one day of his married life for a life four times as long as Nestor’s” (“lui non vorrebbe barattare” etc.): Calenus wishes to get back one of those days (*si redderet Atropos*). Accordingly, I conclude that the end of 10,38 sketches Calenus’ attitude in the hypothetical case that Sulpicia were dead.

Let us now turn to *rogatam* in 10,38,12. All mss. give *rogatam* and, to the best of my knowledge, this reading has not been challenged by anyone. *rogatam* belongs to *lucem . . . vel unam*, “but one day which has been asked for”. Now, one could imagine Calenus praying: “please give me back my wife, even if it be only for one day.” But it is harsh to compress such a prayer into a nominal phrase *rogatam lucem vel unam*: while *rogatam lucem unam* is possible, “the one day you asked for”, *rogatam lucem vel unam* is not because of the presence of *vel*, “the even if only one day you asked for”. I therefore suggest that *rogatam* should be replaced by *rogata*,⁸ which then belongs to *Atropos*: “Atropos, long beseeched”.⁹ Beseeched to do what? To give him back his wife forever, of course. And here comes the twist. Even if Atropos, beseeched to give Sulpicia back to Calenus without any temporal restrictions, offered him the possibility to be reunited for one single day with his wife – the obvious implication being that he too would die after this one single day –, he would not hesitate to accept this offer, rather than living four times as long as Nestor without her.

Further, with the reading of the mss. *malles* is pointless. If Calenus were begging Atropos to fulfil his deepest wish, namely to give him back his wife for one single day (*rogatam lucem unam*), it would be inappropriate to add that he wished this more than anything else, in this case a life four times as long as Nestor’s. With the reading *rogata*, on the other hand, *malles* serves to show how much Calenus loves his wife: “Yes, Atropos, I gladly accept your offer. If I can have my wife back for one single day, I am ready to give up the rest of my life; nay, I would rather have this one single day than a life four times as long as Nestor’s.” This *adumaton* aptly echoes the *adumaton* at the end of 10,35, “even if she were to be the wife of Juppiter, Bacchus or Apollo”.

7) Mattiacci (cf. n. 4) 222 (quoted by Heil [cf. n. 1] 158).

8) The final *-ā* of *rogatā* is short; *brevis in longo* at the end of the hendecasyllabus is not exceptional in Martial: see, for instance, *Calenē* in the first line of this poem, and *puellā* in 10,35,20.

9) Note that all three translations quoted above agree on such a rendering.

If *rogata* is indeed the authentic reading the corruption into the transmitted *rogatam* can be easily explained because the word is immediately followed by the feminine accusative singular *lucem*, while *rogata ... Atropos* is placed in hyperbaton. Moreover, vv. 13 and 14 both end in words in *-am*: *unam* and *senectam* respectively.¹⁰

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