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They Might Be Spurious: Napster and Pseudepigrapha

An activity central to the discipline of philology has always been the identification of spurious texts. Perhaps surprisingly, the process by which pseudepigraphic works come into existence has been studied far less. Scholars have tended to assume that these works are forgeries or deliberate attempts to seek a wider audience by claiming a more famous author. In this paper, however, I will show that the new technology of Internet file sharing offers striking parallels to the circulation of manuscripts in antiquity, and that these parallels create a new model which should cause us to re-evaluate our understanding of the creation and distribution of spurious works in the ancient world.

There are two main similarities between these otherwise quite different technologies. First, their dependence upon circulation communities for distribution of texts: a phenomenon which has been studied extensively in the case of Roman authors. Both poetic circles and Internet file-sharing communities (of which Napster is only one, and now more or less defunct, example) have a similar ethos of free sharing, without any centralized influence over distribution and editing: individuals decide what to copy for themselves or distribute to others. The second similarity consists of the problems with titlature inherent in these decentralized systems. Mislabeled bookrolls can quickly become misattributed, a problem Galen acknowledges in the proem to his work *On His Own Books*; a similar problem occurs with copied software files.

These two phenomena of informal circulation communities and errors in labeling create a situation that encourages the creation of spurious works. In the case of MP3s, many song files that are available for download are misattributed, and in almost every case, a song by a lesser-known artist is attributed to a better-known one. In the absence of centralized distribution, misattributed files, with the name of the better-known artist attached, prove more popular to be sought out, copied, and spread. This similarity between the circulation of works in the pre- and post-Gutenberg eras offers a new explanation for the creation and spread of spurious texts. Texts such as the Appendix Vergiliana can be seen not as deliberate forgeries, but as byproducts of their peculiar technology of creation and distribution.