

Scandalous Verse, Credible Threats, and Literary Theory: Analyzing Catullus 16

Catullus' elusive cleverness in his poem 16 has left generations of readers baffled over what to make of him, his chastity, or his obscene threats. The emphatically repeated promise to "*paedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*" serves as a puzzling frame for a sophisticated study on the discrepancy between a poet and his work, between words and reality. In order to appreciate the full intricacy behind these fourteen lines, I consider each crucial word carefully in the light of scholars like Sandy (1971) and Rankin (1970). Next, I address the pressing question of intertextuality with other Catullus poems, paying special attention towards a new interpretation of c. 5 offered by Fontaine (2008). The strict meaning of Catullus' decrees about poetry is then scrutinized. Finally, the precise force of the opening and closing line is considered: were they delivered in true fury or in cocky but companionable braggadocio? Would a Roman have taken them as fully as someone reading the translation in a lexicon, or would it have come across, at first anyway, as merely generic abuse? The various possibilities for each of these points, crafted ambiguously by Catullus, show that this poem is deliberately slippery: suggestive, elusive, and thoroughly neoteric.

The meaning of this poem seems to hinge, first, on the meanings of some individual words and phrases: "*parum pudicum*," "*male . . . marem*," "*molliculi*." I weigh these possibilities and then consider them in light of the poem's second major question: to what other poems is Catullus alluding? The obvious candidate c. 5, with its companion, c. 7, are opposed to the more homosexual c. 48, favored by Quinn (1999) so much that he declares, "it is almost ludicrous to suppose [that c. 16 refers] to the Lesbia poem" (Quinn 1999: 79). A homosexual angle to c. 16 indeed points strongly to recalling c. 48, while relying on the strong reputation of cc. 5 and 7 to conclude that Catullus has them in mind suggests that, in turn, we should read c. 16 as discussing

general effeminacy. Kinsey (1966) has his own theory, suggesting that the key pertinent poems of Catullus' are lost; ultimately, though, the references to "*milia multa basiorum*" are too familiar for this to be a compelling conclusion. I take the time to examine Fontaine's inventive argument that c. 16 is Catullus' retaliation upon his "friends" for having deciphered c. 5 – itself a cryptic request for obscene activity (Fontaine 2008: 57). While fascinating, this argument relies on links too far-fetched to warrant credibility.

Keeping the plausible options into consideration, I then analyze the strict sense of Catullus' declarations about literary theory, which has been called "as serious and thoughtful a statement of literary belief as can be found in the corpus" by de Angeli, the scholar who considers these words most deeply (de Angeli 1965:57). de Angeli, though, then contends that Catullus' focus is on what makes a *poetum* as such *pium*, arguing for an interpretation more precise and elaborate, I argue, than Catullus plausibly would have worked into remarks so elliptical. Catullus' careful language of "*deceat*," as opposed to something more expected or precise like "*sum*" is noted, as it represents the poem's single most unambiguous stroke of art.

With the body of the poem thus discussed, we return to the opening line and consider how a contemporary Roman may have interpreted both Catullus' tone and meaning. The possibility of actual fury is offset by the possible cerebral use of the occasion to write something elaborate, witty, and disinterested. The sense of the apparently obscene words is also up for conjecture; they may have lost their literal force in colloquial use, only to be reinvigorated by the poet here, or they may have been as vivid to his audience as they are to us. The austere reflection in the center of this poem and the reiteration of the abuse at the end, so odd a coupling, make underlying tone hard to pinpoint. They certainly communicate that Catullus, however he wanted to be understood, was writing a piece as deliberate and elaborate as any.

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