

Comic Elements in Catullus 51¹

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The problem has been how to fit the *otium* stanza at the end on to the rest of the poem. E. Fraenkel has pointed to the hellenistic sequence of thought inside this stanza: *otium* can be ruinous because it induces *luxuria*, τρυφή. *Beatas* is important: the cities brought low by *otium* could, for a time at least, afford vice. Theophrastus had already defined love as πάθος ψυχῆς σχολαζούσης, which may be latinized as *passio animi otiosi*.²

This theme may also be traced in New Comedy, the genre for which Theophrastus' *Characters* so evidently prepare the way. The opening monologue of Diniarchus in the *Truculentus* is relevant here. Like Lucretius later (*De Rer. Nat.* IV. 1123 ff.), Diniarchus bitterly comments on love's expensiveness. And, like Catullus, he associates the high cost of loving with *otium*. He has been speaking of the swelling bank accounts of the *lenones*:

postremo id magno in populo multis hominibus
re placida atque **otiosa**, victis hostibus:
amare oportet omnis qui quod dent habent. (74-76)

"Finally, in a time of baby boom, with peace and leisure thanks to the defeat of our external foes, there is this: the duty of every man with something to give is — to be a lover."

Otium is a leitmotif of the scene: cf. *otiosum*, 136; *otium*, 138; *otiosus*, 142 and 152.

¹This is the expanded text of a talk given at the American Philological Association's Annual Meeting in San Francisco, December 1981.

²E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1957), pp. 212-13. In his turn, Fraenkel is dependent on W. Kroll's still indispensable commentary on Catullus (2nd edition, Leipzig and Berlin 1929). Kroll refers on *otium* both to Theophrastus and to Plautus, *Truc.* 142, *Most.* 137.

No doubt Catullus' last stanza (and Catullus' other poetry) shares something with Plautine New Comedy (cf. *Pseudolus* 64 ff.), but how does that help the unity of poem 51? How do these discrepant lines about *otium* harmonize with the tone of the rest of the poem, in which editors usually hear a univocal declaration of unrestrained infatuation? Because poem 51 itself advertises, by an ostentatious departure from Sappho in its second line, a Plautine, comic connection. This line is the famous *ille, si fas est, superare divos* which, like the last stanza, has also been in trouble with those who expect a translation to be a translation (as if such an expectation made any sense when we are dealing with the Romans!).³ Editors confine themselves here to comment about the "pious restraint" of *si fas est*,⁴ while completely failing to notice the characteristic use of *superare*. Yet a simple glance at the first chapter of Fraenkel's *Elementi plautini in Plauto* establishes the importance of this key word in Plautus' comic imagination. So, for example, *Aulularia* 701-02:

Picis divitiis, qui aureos montis colunt,
ego solus⁵ **supero**...

Persa 1-2:

Qui amans egens ingressus est princeps in Amoris vias
superavit aerumnis suis aerumnas Herculei.

Cistellaria 203-05:

Credo ego Amorem primum apud homines carnificinam commentum.
Hanc ego de me coniecturam domi facio, ni foris quaeram,
qui omnis homines **supero**, antideo cruciabilitibus animi.

Pseudolus 1244:

superavit dolum Troianum atque Ulixem Pseudolus.

³Kroll, for example, says (p. 92) that this line is "ein ziemlich müssiger Zusatz C's in seiner Manier...." See also Fraenkel's "infelice aggiunta," quoted below.

⁴"Catullus would avoid saying anything impious (Westphal)" — Robinson Ellis, *ad loc.* In fact, *si fas est* is a signal that the poet is intent on abandoning the normal bounds of convention, rather as the English idiom "If I may say so" betokens hyperbole of some kind. In Naevius' epitaph (Morel, *Frag. Poet. lat.*, p. 28, no. 64) the *itaque* would make no sense if the *si foret fas flere* of the opening were not taken as conceded. See also the epigram on Scipio by Ennius (Warmington, *Remains of Old Latin* I, p. 400, 3-4), mentioned below, where *si fas est* introduces an outrageous piece of hellenistic flattery.

⁵On *solus* here, with which may be compared the Ennian / Virgilian *unus* applied to Fabius Maximus, cf. E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Berlin 1913), p. 245 and note 1. Ennius uses it of the elder Scipio in his epigram (above, note 4), and it is still echoing in the Byzantine Acclamations: e.g. *μόνε ἀγαθῆ* to Justinian: P. Maas, *Byz. Zeit.* xxi (1912), p. 31. Compare *quoniam tu solus sanctus* in the Gloria of the Mass; *Rev.* 15. 4.

If we follow Fraenkel, from whom these examples are taken, in extending our search to synonyms of *superare* such as *antideo* (*Cist.* 205 *supra*), *antecedo*, *antevenio*, *numquam / haud aequae*, the phenomenon becomes even more striking. In all cases, there is a typical desire to outdo some divine, mythical or collectively human precedent.

Fraenkel naturally notes the application of this to Catullus,⁶ but he is not right when he calls it the "infelice aggiunta catulliana alle parole di Saffo," (and even if it were *infelice* that would still not excuse editors' silence). The attitude revealed by Plautus' *superare* is not unique to Plautus. The belief that the modern, Roman world is not the degenerate descendant of a glorious past (Homer's οἰοί νῦν βροτοῖ ἐῖσι, Hesiod's Age of Iron), but can both recall and outdo it, is deeply ingrained in the Roman temperament. The topic may be followed from Ennius, Plautus' contemporary, through Propertius, Lucan, Statius, Martial, Claudian, Byzantine epigram, to Dante.⁷ Claudian, for example, is the inheritor of a long tradition when he writes (*In Rufinum* I. 283-84): *taceat superata vetustas*.... "The days of old are surpassed; let them keep silence and cease to compare Hercules' labours with thine."⁸ This *taceat*, of which Martial is fond (*Lib. Spect.* 6. 3; 28. 11) finds an echo in Dante: *taccia Lucano...taccia...Ovidio* (*Inferno* 25. 94 and 97). The *cedat* topos (cf. Prop. II. 2. 13 *cedite iam, divae*; 34B. 65 *cedite, Romani scriptores* etc.: Lucan VII. 408 *cedant feralia nomina Cannae*: Martial, *Lib. Spect.* 1. 7 *cedit: A.P.* IX. 656. 11 ἐῖξον) is obviously a variant. The Propertian examples in particular seem to link both Catullus (*divae / divos*) and Dante (*Romani scriptores / Lucano...Ovidio*).

The classical Greeks did not think this way,⁹ and in poem 64 Catullus does not think this way either, though what he says at the end there is to be tempered by the realization that the poem is part of that central cycle of long poems which lends such *gravitas* to his *nugae*.¹⁰ Is this inconsistency simply poetic privilege, or is the poet telling us something? It is not after all Catullus in poem 51 who seems to outdo the gods, but *ille. Ego sum ille rex Philippus* says Lyconides' slave in the *Aulularia* (704). And, in a strongly Ennian passage, Virgil writes: *tun*

⁶*Elementi plautini*, p. 14. note 1.

⁷Cf. Otto Weinreich, *Studien zu Martial* (Stuttgart 1928), pp. 30 ff.; E. R. Curtius, *Römische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern 1948), pp. 168-72.

⁸Loeb translation by Maurice Platnauer, I, p. 47. Cf. Plautus, *Persa* 2, quoted above.

⁹E. Fraenkel on *Agamemnon* 532. Pindar's remark at *P.* 6. 44: τὰ μὲν παρίκει τῶν νῦν δέ is especially noteworthy.

¹⁰G. Jachmann, "Sappho und Catull," *Rheinisches Museum* 107 (1964), p. 18, note 44, refers us indeed to Cat. 68. 141.

Maximus ille es, / Unus qui nobis cunctando restituis rem? (*Aen.* VI. 845-46). The telling *unus* should be noted: cf. Plautus, *Mil. Glor.* 56). Indeed, we already know Catullus' *si fas est* from an epigram of Ennius on the elder Scipio, where Scipio is made to claim, though hardly with "pious restraint," entry to heaven itself.¹¹

Catullus' contrast then between *ille* and himself, the *misero* of line 5, with an adjective often used of the comic / elegiac lover,¹² acquires extra dimensions, unknown to Sappho. Catullus is unsuccessful: *ille* is the supremely successful hellenistic hero / prince. In this unequal contest, Catullus' identification of himself with Sappho borders, but of course only borders, on the burlesque, and anticipates Ariosto's Sacripante.¹³ Sappho says quite simply that she has "no sight in her eyes." Catullus' *geminā teguntur / lumina nocte*, which has puzzled scholars by its audacity, makes the poet almost die like a Homeric or Virgilian warrior.¹⁴ The symptom which is incidental in Sappho, and in Lucretius' imitation, is placed by Catullus emphatically at the end, precisely where it corresponds to Sappho's allusion to death. Lurking behind all this is the familiar antithesis of the rich lover, often a military man, and the "poor poet."

I would like to suggest therefore that a proper understanding of Catullus 51. 2 sets the line in the comic, mock-heroic tradition congenial to the Roman temperament.¹⁵ that such a perspective enables us to unite the *otium* stanza, also treating a comic theme, more easily with the rest of the poem:¹⁶ and that accordingly in Catullus' translation of Sappho an element of ironic, Alexandrian self-mockery, found elsewhere in the poet, makes it dangerous to interpret the poem as an early and unambiguous declaration of love.

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¹¹Above, notes 4 and 5.

¹²R. Pichon, *De Sermone Amatorio apud Latinos Elegiarum Scriptores* (Paris 1902), pp. 202-03: *Thes. Ling. Lat.* vol. 8, col. 1103, 18 ff.

¹³*Orlando Furioso* I. 43. The king quotes, without perhaps quite realizing what he is doing, from the girls' chorus at Catullus 62. 39 ff.

¹⁴A. Turyn, *Studia Sapphica, Eus Supplementa* 6 (Lvov 1929), pp. 48-50: cf. H. Akbar Khan, "Color Romanus in Catullus 51," *Latomus* 25 (1966), p. 459.

¹⁵*Italum acetum*, *Hor. Sat.* I. 7. 32. Perhaps this national propensity explains Quintilian's complacent *satura tota nostra est*.

¹⁶The final vision of devastation (*et reges prius et beatas / perdidit urbes*) now corresponds to the latent antithesis described at the end of the previous paragraph. Catullus knows why he inevitably loses against his rival.