Catullus and Re(w)righting the Roman Social Order

With the opening question of c. 47 ("Porci et Socration duae sinistrae…"), Catullus proposes a moral and social division: Piso has chosen his degenerate lackeys, Porcius and Socration, over Veranius and Fabullus, Catullus' beloved companions. Rather than dismissing the comment as a personal grievance against an unfair praetor, this paper argues that Catullus denigrates military distinction to dispute the new emphasis on military accomplishments in determining social influence. Catullus frames Piso and his confederates as a group antithetical to his own in terms of behavior and morality in order to isolate military men from both the aristocracy and the aristocratic power base. The concluding sentence of the poem provides evidence for his concerns: Veranius and Fabullus, members of Catullus' circle, have fallen to the status of street-beggars. Thus not only is Piso's group corrupt, but malignantly so, threatening to diminish the social status of aristocrats as he has Veranius and Fabullus.

Catullus perceives the rising glory and influence of military leaders as a threat to the authority of the aristocracy. Social identity theory explains group interaction in terms of such threats and reactions to them: groups undergo a constant cycle of evaluation between an in-group and the pertinent out-group (Tajfel and Turner 2004). The evaluation concerns the primary measures of accomplishment in a society, that is, those possessions, tangible or intangible, which have a shared importance across multiple groups. These measures vary according to each society's demands and expectations, but can include wealth, military strength, knowledge, artistic output, and skin colour. After an evaluation, the group perceived as superior in that society's primary measure has proved its legitimate claim to power over the other group(s). When a disadvantaged out-group attempts to surpass the current ruler, it may engage in direct competition of these measures, or, when victory by that course appears arduous and unlikely, the

out-group may affect a shift in the primary measure of accomplishment which will position itself as undeniably superior.

Applying social identity theory to Catullus' poetry, this paper argues that Catullus recognizes an attempted shift by military leaders in the aristocratic measure of accomplishment, who promoted military wealth and success in place of personal *virtus* and *pietas* (Rosenstein 1990). To preserve his social circle's superior status, he cultivates a distinction between military men and true aristocrats, that is, he artificially crafts an out-group in order to portray military leaders as undeserving of power.

Aware of the Roman commitment to tradition, Catullus relies on conservative values and conventional methods of social discrimination, primarily invective and stereotyping. C. 47, for example, utilizes the conventional invective tropes of disease and overindulgence in eating; these tropes, along with sexual deviance and extravagant pretensions, reoccur consistently throughout the collection to demonstrate a deep-rooted relationship between military figures and fundamental Roman vices. Appropriating conventional methods rewarded Catullus in two ways: not only could he paint military figures as corrupt and hostile to the social order, but his position as accuser also cast him and his social circle in a positive moral light.

In recognizing and responding to a contemporary social threat, Catullus' poetry moves beyond personal invective to actively renegotiate the social roles and power structures of the Late Republic.

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