

Catullus in The World of Smells

Scent played a prominent part in Roman society, Rome itself was notably foul smelling. A myriad of sources of pungent odors in the city, contributed to a nauseating Roman smellscape (Koloski-Ostrow 2015). The concept of an olfactory understanding of Roman civilization has been discussed in depth in recent scholarship, as has the idea of racial separation and diversity in antiquity. However, the role of smell in the perception of difference is quite an under-discussed topic within the realm of race and diversity in the Ancient Mediterranean. It is a neglected truth that humans observe each other through all senses, however, in past literature and scholarship, sight is typically privileged over the others.

This paper argues for the consideration of a multi-sensory conception of race and otherness by examining olfactory elements in the poetry of Catullus, as part of a subsequent larger chronological study of the development of racial perception through scent, with a close consideration of poems 13, 23, 37, 39, and 69, as they relate to the concept of otherness across intersectional lines of race, class, and gender in Rome during the Late Republic.

Scent is arguably the most social sense in that it is the only sense that is utterly shareable. In fact, scents, formed by particles of different ingredients, literally penetrate the nose, entering the body. Roman people, as all humans, were also quite foul smelling through the secretion of sweat, urine, and excrement with very few ways to control human odor (Bradley, 135). Catullus never hesitates to comment on this fact. In his scent related poems, Catullus positions himself in the center of his world of scents. He smells all, but never smells himself, thus absorbing all that is around him, but never contributing to the relevant smellscape. At the same time, he gives

value judgments on different scents, often to leverage himself over others, by highlighting their lack of good scent caused by a lapse in hygiene, money, or culture.

In Catullus 13, he invites Fabullus for dinner, but offers the *unguentum* of Venuses and Cupids via his lover (presumably Lesbia) instead of the usual food and wine because he does not have the money for them. By claiming that he has access to such scents, he shows that what he has is in fact above the wealth of Fabullus, a woman who smells so good that her sexual appeal is almost palpable and will make him wish that he was “all nose” (Fitzgerald, 98-99). By contrast, in Catullus 69, he speaks of Rufus, who seems to be a wealthy man, yet, despite his riches, did not have the sense or culture to manage the smell of goats in his underarms with baths or perfumes. Catullus’ Ignatius was insulted for the apparently Spanish practice of brushing his teeth with urine (Cat. 37, 39). Ignatius, who is presumably very successful with the women because of his bright smile, is made out to be a dirty scoundrel by Catullus, who tries intentionally to make him less attractive. The opposite of these, however, is Furius in Catullus 23, who does not produce liquids. If one conceptualizes human odor as a result of the secretion from one’s orifices, a man who makes no secretion must have no scent, and thus imply the utmost cleanliness. Catullus praises him for this reason, saying that he should be grateful for being so “dry.”

Though Catullus does not speak of his own scent in these poems, he implicitly creates an “in” group consisting of himself and his audience, creating an “out” group of those to whom he addresses his poems along lines of race and class. Catullus, however, does not make claims that would contribute to a structure of racecraft, the framework of dividing people with reference to existing power structures in society, as he only speaks on people’s scents on an individual basis

rather than a general one. While Catullus himself does not actively participate in racecraft, he arguably sets the stage for clearer racecrafting in the later works of Martial and Juvenal.

Works Cited

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