

## To Whom Am I Dedicating My New Little Talk? To Catullus and Nepos

This talk reviews the scholarly debate about the sincerity of Catullus' dedicatory poem to Cornelius Nepos (poem 1) and seeks to reconcile it against the scholarly debate about the merits of Nepos' extant corpus.

It has long been observed that there is a correlation between, on the one hand, the Alexandrian qualities of daring, innovation, learning, and care that Catullus attributes to Nepos in the poem (*ausus es unus Italorum, doctis et laboriosis*, 1.5-7) and, on the other, those same implicit qualities in his own charmingly new and freshly polished little book (1.1-2). But the question of the sincerity behind Catullus' creation of this correlation has generated a wide spectrum of scholarly opinion since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (for a full bibliography, see Thomson 1997: 200-1). On one end of the spectrum, Nepos is so dull and pedantic as a biographer that Catullus cannot be sincere (Copley 1951). On the other end, Nepos is the intellectual partner of Catullus who merely writes in a historical genre (Wiseman 1979). In the middle is a blend of the two, a Nepos who shares some of Catullus' literary values but is not to be understood as demonstrating similarly Alexandrian literary values. Even here, the question remains whether Catullus is praising Nepos sincerely (Elder 1966), ironically (Gibson 1995), or teasingly (Rauk 1997).

Scholarly opinion about Nepos himself has ranged almost as widely, and on roughly comparable terms. On one end of the range, he has been criticized for his plainness and carelessness (Horsfall 1989). On the other, he has been praised as a generic innovator and the inventor of political biography (Geiger 1985). In between, he has been studied as a carefully calibrated voice responding to the turmoil of the Roman Revolution (Dionisotti 1988, Millar 1988).

This talk will advocate a compromise position: that Nepos does show daring and innovation throughout his literary corpus, but that his extant work does not demonstrate Alexandrian sensibilities. The cultural and intellectual possibility of a "neoteric" Nepos, in sum, is not identifiable in practice in his extant work. Yet Nepos can remain innovative and rough, rather than charming and polished, and still merit Catullus' dedication for his encouragement that the poet's trifles were worth something. As Elder (1966) characterized it, Nepos is the Ennian to Catullus' Callimachean. The sincerity behind the poem itself remains subjective, but its literary claims can be limited by setting Catullus' characterization of Nepos against Nepos' known practice.

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