

A Plautine Goat in Rufus's Armpit: The Poetics of Smells in Catullus 69, 71, and 97

Scholars from Morris (1909) via Skinner (1971) to O'Bryhim (2007) have established a place for Plautine intertexts in Catullan poetics: "[Catullus takes] some of the recognizable characters of comedy ... and set[s] them in motion," but he does so "without allowing the resolution of the comic finale" (Nappa 2001: 161). In my paper, I will argue that this progression from a New Comic starting point not to a "happy ending", but to confusion, anger, and moral ambiguity, is metaphorized in Catullus's treatment of smells in poems 69, 71, and 97.

In Plautine comedy, the attribution of different odors to different personages reliably reflects these characters' personalities and prospects (Franko 1999). E.g., the desirable title-character of the *Casina* is described as sweet-smelling throughout. For as long as the play's lusty *senex* maintains control of the plot, he too smells of perfume (*Cas.* 226-27, 236-40, 266, 277, 554), but as he loses his grip, he develops halitosis (727). The play sums up its olfactory concerns with a warning to the unappreciative spectator: *ei pro scorto supponetur hircus unctus nautea* ("he will receive a goat drenched in bilge-water rather than a prostitute," *Cas.* 1018).

At first sight, Catullus's poetry seems to map scents onto its characters in a similarly trustworthy fashion. At c. 13.14, e.g., the desirable *puella*'s perfumes are utterly irresistible and render us "all nose" (*totum ... nasum*). Conversely, the most explicit attribution of foul smells to foul characters occurs in c. 69. Catullus here tells Rufus that it is because a stinking goat lives in his arm-pits (*valle sub alarum trux habitare caper*, 69.6) that no woman wants to sleep with him, even though he showers them with favors like expensive clothing (69.3). The epigram thus quite directly reflects a standard Plautine scenario: in the Catullan *libellus*'s New Comic contexts, the gift of a beautiful garment in exchange for sex will recall Menaechmus's frustrated attempts at bribing a prostitute with his wife's *palla*. The fact that it is precisely Rufus's body-odor that

hinders his advances is similarly evocative of the *palliata* model, and the ‘goat’ in his armpit may even recall the *hircus unctus nautea* from the *Casina*. For now, therefore, all is in order. Rufus’s Plautine attempts at seduction fail for a profoundly Plautine reason: he stinks like a goat.

Yet once we turn to c. 71, it turns out the Catullan world does not in fact conform to the rules the fan of Plautus would expect. We learn that the man “whom the accursed goat of the armpits hinders” (*cui ... sacer alarum obstitit hircus*, 71.1) actually does have sex. The effect on the Roman reader would be one of consternation as the rules of the comic cosmos are broken. The lines that best express the Catullan *persona*’s own helpless and angry surprise at this anti-Plautine turn-of-events come from another poem attacking an ill-smelling opponent. This particular composition also confirms that we were indeed meant to make the connection to New Comedy: c. 97 opens with the comic exclamation *ita me di ament* (97.1), which occurs nowhere else outside of Plautus and Terence. Having thus foregrounded his engagement with New Comic themes, Catullus notes that he is not sure if he would rather sniff Aemilius’s *os* or his *culus* (*utrumne os an culum olfacerem Aemilio*, 97.2), but to his astonishment, this man still “fucks many women ... and is not sent off to the mill and donkey” (*hic futuit multas ... / et non pistrino traditur atque asino?* 97.9-10).

The breach of New Comic decorum that allows a man who—by *palliata* definition—should be a failed ‘villain’ to be sexually successful highlights the Catullan cosmos’s departure from its New Comic model. The *persona* is clearly exasperated by this lack of comic accountability in the world he inhabits, and he expresses his annoyance in recognizably Plautine terms. After all, that the scoundrel instead be sent to the threshing-floor is precisely what one would have expected from Roman comedy. Here, this punishment was in fact so common that first-century biographical scholars suspected Plautus of having written some of his plays during a

stint in the mill (Gell. 3.3.14). Yet there is no such comic ‘justice’ to be found in Catullan poetry, where foul-smelling villains go to bed with beautiful women.

Works Cited

Morris, E. 1909. “An Interpretation of Catullus VIII.” *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 15: 139-51.

Nappa, C. 2001. *Aspects of Catullus’ Social Fiction*. Frankfurt am Main: Lang.

O’Byrhim, S. 2007. “Catullus 23 as Roman Comedy.” *TAPA* 137: 133-45

Skinner, M. 1971. “Catullus 8: The Comic *Amator* as *Eiron*.” *CJ* 66: 298-305.

Franko, G. 1999. “Imagery and Names in Plautus’ *Casina*.” *CJ* 95: 1-17.