

Quoniam Grammaticus Es...: Grammatical Games in Catullus 56

In Catullus' c. 56 the poet invites a certain Cato to laugh as he relates a humorous and erotic tableau:

O rem ridiculam, Cato, et iocosam,
dignamque auribus et tuo cachinno!
ride quidquid amas, Cato, Catullum:
res est ridicula et nimis iocosa.
deprendi modo pupulum puellae
trusantem; hunc ego, si placet Dionae,
protelo rigida mea cecidi.

It is a short poem, but it boasts a disproportionately large list of obstacles for our interpretation. First, there is the question of the addressee, whom scholars have long sought to identify with one of two contemporary figures known by that cognomen, the statesman Marcus Porcius Cato and the poet-grammarians Publius Valerius Cato. Advocates for the former emphasize the irony of asking Cato Minor, who was so rigidly prudish that he once excused himself from a pantomime performance so that the scheduled striptease could continue without his offense, to delight in an anecdote that, while rather vague in its specifics, is obviously sexually suggestive. Those who favor the grammarians make reference to his attested professional and personal associations with other New Poets, some of whom are named by Catullus elsewhere in his poetry. Neither argument has been wholly convincing, in part because our understanding of the rest of the poem is frustrated by certain ambiguities in Catullus' language.

The schematics of the sexual encounter described in the verses that follow the opening address are not immediately clear, and so we are left to wonder what about the *res* is so

incredibly funny as to warrant such emphatic repetition and to make it worthy of Cato's or our laughter. This complication can be credited to the constellation of lexical peculiarities that gather at the poem's conclusion: the syntax and precise meaning of the hapax *trusantem* and the consequent syntactic relationship between the participle's subject *pupulum* and oblique-case noun *puellae* in lines 5-6; the unexpected appeal to Dione in line 6; and the best reading and import of *protelo* (or *pro telo*) in line 7. The high concentration of lexical issues is uncharacteristic for Catullus, whose interpretation is far more commonly hindered by textual issues rather than opaque language.

All of these difficulties have conspired to make an entirely satisfactory reading of c. 56 somewhat elusive. It seems plausible, therefore, that they are in some way interdependent, and that the best interpretation of the poem will be able to treat them in this way. In other words, a reading that can reconcile the identity of the Cato, the ambiguity of the *res*, and the significance of Catullus' choices in diction will be stronger than a reading that addresses only one or two of the problems, or that answers the three questions, especially the third composite question, in ways that are inconsistent with one another or the unity of the short poem. In my paper I aim to do just this, to coordinate the three problems of the poem—its addressee, the ambiguity of the event described, and its perplexing lexical miscellany—to provide a cohesive exegesis. My reading imagines the abstruse diction and the sexual scene it obscures not as uncertainties to be explained away, but rather the substance of a puzzle that Catullus has intentionally created for his addressee. That addressee, I argue, is the grammarian Valerius Cato, whose reputation maintained, according to Suetonius' biography at *De Grammaticis et Rhetoribus* 11, that he *omnes solvere posse quaestiones*, "could solve all [grammatical] questions." Catullus addressed c. 56 to this Cato, with whom at least a friendly acquaintance is already recommended by their

mutual contacts, because he possessed the tools to decipher rare words and defiant syntax in order to elucidate a text and tease out the bawdy specifics of the poem's narrative.

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