

Poetic Identity and the Poet's Muse: An Interpretation of Catullus 35 & 36

Much of the scholarship on Catullus 35 has centered on the poet Caecilius; similarly, often the focus of poem 36 has been the character and content of Volusius' *Annales*. Additionally, interpretations of both poems (Copley, Basto, Khan, Quinn, Fredricksmeier, Foster, Hansen) have often involved elaborate reconstructions of the "real-life" situations – the relationship between Catullus and other poets as well as his relationship with Lesbia (despite the fact that she is not actually named in either poem) – and exchanges of literary works. In what may seem a bold move, I suggest that neither the identity of the named authors nor the attempts at biographical reconstruction are necessary – and may even be hindrances – to appreciating and understanding these two poems. Instead, a close look at the poems themselves is revealing. The pair contain so many parallels as to suggest that they were perhaps written formulaically, or as variations on a theme (literary criticism): the direct address to the paper rather than the author; a writer with whose work Catullus is familiar in some way; issues of praise and blame, including the qualities (and exempla) of good and bad writing; the poet extending pardon to the *puella*, or seeking it from her; a goddess (Cybele or Venus) as the subject or dedicatee of some poetic work; the suggested reconciliation of the poet and the girl by the poem's close. In sum, my approach involves these central ideas: 1) that whoever arranged the corpus (whether Catullus himself or an astute reader) deliberately placed these two poems together to elicit their parallels and contrasts; 2) that the poems, while possibly inspired by real-life events or individuals, are most productively read as pieces of creativity and innovation (of which there are several other examples in Catullus' oeuvre); and 3) that, rather than the author named in each *carmen*, each poem's crux is the *puella* and her response to the poet's work, which serves as a significant influence on the author and – so Catullus suggests – guides literary production and focus. While

many critics (Hunink, Solodow, Sklenar, Buchheit, Morgan, et al.) have rightly observed the literary concerns of either poem's content, none has boldly advanced the possibility that either Caecilius or Volusius, who both remain obscure (e.g., as Neudling observes, "the complete disappearance of Caecilius from our records would be puzzling in view of the praise given by Catullus... ", p. 24), may have been a convenient fictional device deployed with an eye to a punny little name-game. I suggest that Caecilius is essentially a diminutive of *caecus*, "blind" or even "obscure"; what would be more appropriate to call a poet of an epyllion, particularly given the scenario of the poem? Similarly, Volusius derives from *volvo*, an apt association for an author who so hastily and sloppily churns out his annals that he seems to have defecated them (Di Brazzano). Despite the many delightful and clever touches in either poem, though, the heart remains the unnamed *puella*, whose response to the author's works serves to guide...or distract.

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