

Theft and Secrecy in Catullus

Acts of theft and secrecy are marked in Catullus by his use of terms incorporating the base “*fur-*”: *fur* (33.1, 62.34), *furtum* (12.7, 68.136, and perhaps 68.140), *furtim* (66.5), and *furtivus* (7.8, 65.19, 67.41, 68.45). Despite the obvious etymological connection, these terms have a broad application in the Catullan corpus. The descriptions of thieves and theft (*fures, furta*) entail unequivocally derogative characterizations of those who commit such offenses. Those, however, who engage in secretive activity (*furtim, furtivus, furta*), particularly of the erotic variety, are not universally condemned; there is, for example, little to suggest that the poet disdains the *furtivos amores* that the stars observe (7.8).

Despite the diversity in the poet’s use of terms related to theft and secrecy, there is a consistent underlying theme in these instances. All reveal the speaker’s confidence, or lack thereof, in his control over what is exposed and what is hidden and, ultimately, over the limits and boundaries of the human relationships central to these passages. In the polymetric poems, the speaker reveals his desire to be an arbiter of exclusion and inclusion. He exerts his authority through exposing the secret and inappropriate behavior of thieves like Pollio (12), Thallus (25), and the Vibennii (33). The prominence of evaluative social and aesthetic terms (*ineptus*, 12.4 and 25.8; *invenustus*, 12.5) and political imagery (*cur non exilium malasque in oras, / itis? 33.5-6*) establish the outsider status of these thieves and the insider status of the speaker. Though the poet is less harsh in his evaluation of furtive acts of love, he still maintains a position of authority as the arbiter of inclusion and exclusion. In poems 5 and 7, he wishes to keep his affair with Lesbia hidden from those he has deemed *mali* and *curiosi* (5.12, 7.11), in contrast to the stars that overlook hidden trysts of lovers (*furtivos amores*, 7.8). In poem 6, however, which is neatly inserted between the two poems for urging for romantic privacy, the speaker is eager to publicize his friend Flavius’ sexual practices. The speaker exerts his influence by using charged social and aesthetic terms (*lepidae atque inelegantes*, 6.2; *ineptiarum*, 6.14) and by announcing his intent to publicize Flavius’ tryst (*volo te ac tuos amores / ad caelum lepido vocare versu*, 6.16-17). In all these poems, the speaker is sure of his relationship with his friends and lover and he seems confident in his control of information.

The speaker’s confidence, however, seems to dissolve in his treatment of secretive acts in poems 65-68. The poet in these poems tries to keep the same control he had displayed earlier, but these attempts are continually presented as frustrated. He compares his personal and artistic frustration to a young girl’s inability to hide a lover’s secret gift (*furtivo munere*, 65.19) from her mother. In poem 68, Catullus is not exposing *furta*, nor is he creating an atmosphere of privacy; it is Lesbia who determines her own secretive behavior, the poet can only endure it (*feremus*, 68.136). Furthermore, the language of social aesthetics (*stultorum, molesti*, 68.137) is no longer in the poet’s control, but rather employed by Lesbia; the poet must submit to her code to avoid incurring the labels of exclusion over which he had authority in the earlier poems.