

Catullus et Calvus: Poetic Friendship in Catullus 50 and 14

Both Catullus' poem 14 and poem 50 are verse epistles addressed to his fellow poet Calvus concerning poetry and friendship. While much has been written concerning the relationship of poem 50 to the neighboring poem 51 (Buchheit 1976, Burgess 1986, Finamore 1984, Scott 1969, Williams 1988), its relationship to the oft overlooked poem 14 has been heretofore largely overshadowed by its more famous neighbor, despite the poems' striking similarities of subject and addressee. Following Paul Allen Miller's (1994) treatment of companion pieces in the Catullan corpus, I argue in this paper that poems 14 and 50 ought to be read together as a coherent statement on friendship and poetry from which arises a uniquely Catullan notion of "poetic friendship," a metapoetic complex of friendship between poets founded on poetry mediated by and expressed in verse.

I first demonstrate the thematic parallels between the two poems, focusing on leisure, verse-play, wit, and aesthetic exclusivity. Building off of scholarly work on the role of *otium*, the Roman concept of leisure, in poem 50 (Finamore 1984; Laidlaw 1968; Segal 1970; Zimmermann 2016), especially Vinzenz Buchheit's (1976) analysis of the poem as a programmatic statement for the avant-garde "neoteric" movement of which Catullus and Calvus were prominent members, I read the typically Catullan (or perhaps neoteric; Ross 1969) vocabulary of the poem as signaling Catullus' and Calvus' belonging in a select in-group. (Re)reading poem 14 in the light of poem 50, I draw out the identification of Catullus and Calvus with their shared literary-aesthetic preferences, a typically neoteric gesture delineating a witty "us" against a boorish "them," and compare this to parallel definitions-by-exclusion across the corpus, as exemplified

by poem 43, which culminates in the famous exclamation “O tasteless and witless age!” (*o saeculum insipiens et inficetum!* 43.8).

I argue that the poems’ depiction of poetic mutuality, i.e., both the reciprocal exchange of thematically proportional verse (Burgess 1986) and the mutual experience of verse and verse production, as well as the thematic complex arising from poems 14 and 50, characterize Catullus’ and Calvus’ friendship as it is constructed throughout the collection (cf. poems 53 and 96). Finally, I conclude that the two men, though both real historical actors with a historically attestable relationship, become in the context of Catullus’ poetry a symbolic manifestation of the ideal literary friendship. But, beyond even this idealization, the conjunction of Catullus and Calvus takes on a verbal (after)life of its own, coming to stand in for the abstract mutuality of verse as such. Thus later writers (including but not limited to Horace, Propertius, Seneca the Elder, and Pliny the Younger) might speak of *Catullus et Calvus* or *Catullus aut Calvus* as a byword for literary friendship—perhaps no author so much as when Ovid, apostrophizing to Catullus, refers to Calvus as “your Calvus, learned Catullus” (*Calvo, docte Catulle, tuo, Am.* 3.9.62).

Works Cited

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