

Catullus' Comic Economics: Aufillena Between Comedy and Elegy (Poem 110)

Scholarship on Catullus' poem 110 usually interprets its situation as follows: Aufillena, having promised the poem's speaker sexual favors in exchange for money, has gone back on her word and in the process violated their contract and her professional ethics as a prostitute (Persson 1914, Fordyce 1961, Quinn 1970, Arkins 1982, Wiseman 1985). In contrast to these biographical readings, I argue that the poem must be situated within its complex literary context and traditions and that, rather than a real prostitute, Aufillena is a literary construct modeled on the *meretrix* or *lena avara* ("greedy courtesan" or "greedy madame") of Roman comedy. The situation described here draws heavily upon one of the genre's most common stock-scenes, in which the *adulescens amator* ("young lover"), having given gifts and money to a woman, remains sexually unsatisfied and rebukes her.

Taking my cue from Pedrick (1986) and Skinner (1989), who point out ways in which the unreliable speaker manipulates his audience, I argue that we must be wary of his one-sided attack and that Catullus *qua* poet encourages our skepticism regarding Aufillena's status by introducing inconsistencies in her representation elsewhere in the corpus. In poem 100, Aufillena is depicted as a respectable love interest, while in poem 111 she is an *univira* ("one-man woman") whom the speaker (backhandedly) praises, because "for a woman to live content with one man is worth the highest praise for brides" (*viro contentam vivere solo, / nuptarum laus ex laudibus eximiis*, 1–2). She is clearly, then, not a prostitute, despite the insinuations of poem 110's invective. Moreover, Forsyth (1981) suggests her name plays on the word *lena* or "madame," a female brothel owner and one of the main antagonists of the *adulescens* in comedy. This wordplay acts as a metapoetic marker (a technique common in Augustan poets; Heslin 2011) that points to the comic *lena*.

Roman comedy often features the *adulescens* lamenting that he gives gifts to his girl but gets nothing in return, and the example of this shtick at *Asinaria* 153–248 overlaps substantially with motifs and vocabulary of Catullus’ poem 110. There the *adulescens* Argyrippus complains to the *lena* Cleareta that he gave what they agreed upon (*dedi equidem quod mecum egisti*, 173), which the Catullan speaker mirrors by saying that good girls get payment for what they agree to do (*accipiunt pretium, quae facere instituunt*, 110.2). Argyrippus moans that when the *lena* gets her price, she immediately plots to demand more (*quom accepisti, haud multo post aliquid quod poscas paras*, 167); cf. the Catullan speaker’s accusations *nec das et fers* and *data corripere* (110.4, 6). Significantly, both passages discuss erotic relationships in terms of social obligation (*fraudando officiis*, 110.7; *quid me accusas si facio officium meum?*, 173). I argue that this ties into gendered definitions of “good” vs. “bad” behavior that appear in both Catullus and comedy: men like Argyrippus and Catullus’ speaker dub women who receive gifts without returning sex as “bad,” while clever *meretrices* and *lenae* claim their obligation as “good” women is to trick gullible lovers out of as much money as possible. Aufillena, then, is not a prostitute who broke her contract, but a successful “bad girl,” the quintessential woman of Roman comedy (Anderson 1993).

This financial premise is the same one on which Latin erotic elegy is based (James 1998), and I conclude by suggesting that Aufillena represents a proto-elegiac *puella* that bridges the gap between Roman comedy and elegy, whose allusive relationship has long been recognized (James 1998, Fulkerson 2013). Catullus’ appropriation of comedy’s interest in the economics of erotic relations in first-person personal poetry thus sets the stage for the elegists in the next generation.

Bibliography

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