

Catullus and Juventius

It is widely assumed that two erotic relationships dominate the poems of Catullus: that with Lesbia (which would be a hard notion to reject) and that with the youth Juventius (Arkins 1982, 104-16; Claes 2002; Gaisser 2009, 60-66). Scholars vary in describing how this latter relationship worked. As usually treated, the relationship with Juventius shares some of the potential troubles of that with Lesbia, for example, looming possibilities of adulterous infidelities. In any case, there is no shortage of scholarship that simply and confidently names Juventius as the lover or boyfriend of Catullus (e.g., Lee 1990, 153-55; Garrison 1989, 108). This paper will contend that the Juventius poems of Catullus have been radically misread and that the poems show no evidence of a reciprocal relationship between the two. In the Lesbia poems, there is evidence that, however bad things might sometimes be, Lesbia herself acknowledges that she has a relationship with Catullus, and he describes definite encounters and exchanges between them: these include such poems as 8, 11, 68, 72, and 76. To the extent there is a sexual history for Juventius, it is with other people, men he seems to prefer to Catullus.

I will start by briefly revisiting those poems which are said to make up a Juventius cycle, with a focus on those that clearly include Juventius, cc. 15, 21, 23-24, 48, 81, and 99. Despite numerous modern accounts, there is no poem involving Juventius in which it is clear that Juventius has ever reciprocated Catullus' devotion. The two do seem to know each other, but nowhere is Juventius shown or even said to have encouraged or reciprocated Catullus' feelings.

Poems 15 and 21 are both addressed to Aurelius, a man who seems to have designs on Juventius of a piece with his general habit of, as Catullus sees it, preying on young men. While some (e.g., Quinn 1970, 140; Thomson 1997, 248) see in these addresses a playful tone, this is not borne out by the text. These poems show us much about Catullus the would-be lover and

how he views his potential rival Aurelius, but very little about Juventius himself or his relationship to Catullus. Poem 21 pretends to entrust the boy to Aurelius, only to warn the latter to keep his hands off. Poem 21 tropes lust as hunger, and a hunger that Juventius could learn. Moreover, if Aurelius gives in to his desire for Juventius, Catullus will treat him as an adulterer. Yet neither poem argues or even suggests that Juventius shares any of Catullus' concerns. Catullus will treat the seduction of Juventius as a form of adultery but Juventius has no opinion on this matter that is even implied. His preferences are not made clear and the elevation of whatever relationship he has with Catullus—or that Catullus might want with him—into a de facto marriage seems to reside with Catullus alone.

Similarly, Catullus fears that the poor Furius has designs on Juventius' money. Yet when Juventius is represented as speaking about Furius in poems 24 and 81, he seems to prefer him to Catullus and to have no worries about his own money. If, in the case of Aurelius, we have only Catullus' word for the nature of his relationship with Juventius, in the case of Furius we have someone who appears to be a successful rival. Juventius does not share Catullus' concerns over Furius' poverty just as he may not be concerned with Aurelius' lusts. To the extent these poems point toward a relationship between Juventius and Catullus, it is one between a put-upon youth and an unwanted suitor.

The last certain Juventius poem may make this state even clearer, although it too can be misread by those who want Catullus to be the hero of his poems. In 99, Catullus remembers stealing a kiss from Juventius in response to what he describes as flirting (*dum ludis*), but Juventius had none of it. He wiped off the kiss as if it were the polluting kiss of a whore and made Catullus suffer for it. Catullus' sweet kiss ends up transformed into hellebore—a cure for

madness. I argue that the most sensible reading of this poem is that Catullus saw flirting where there was none and a close *amour* whether there was only casual acquaintance.

Bibliography

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