

Salve ... ianua: The Place of Poem 67 in the Corpus of Catullus

Poem 67, the dialogue between a passer-by and a house door, is unusual in the corpus of Catullus both in its theme and its position in the corpus. One of the elegiacs, it is grouped with the so-called “long poems” (poems 61-68), yet its subject matter—a conversation with a door concerning the scandals within the house—seems closer to that of the shorter elegiacs (69-116) or polymetrics (1-60)—as J.K. Newman remarks, “it is so clearly iambic in inspiration” (Newman 1990: 227)—than the more formal subjects (mainly marriage) treated in the other “long poems.” In addition, aside from poem 65 (an introduction to 66) and the first part of 68 (ll. 1-40, if considered a separate poem introducing the rest of 68), poem 67 is, at 48 lines, by far the shortest of the “long poems.” The problems to be considered are the form and theme of poem 67 and its position within the collection.

Poem 67 is difficult to categorize easily and has been the subject of a great deal of scholarship. A.L. Wheeler notes the poem’s unusual character: although elegiac, it is a dramatic dialogue in which one of the speakers is an inanimate object—which, he asserts, is “common enough in ancient poetry, but this is the first appearance of the device in elegy.” (Wheeler 1934: 174). He further observes that Poem 67 differs from the other long poems and more closely resembles the shorter poems in demonstrating “colloquialism” and even “vulgarism” (Wheeler 1934: 50).

As a conversation between a speaker and a door, poem 67 at first appears to be an example of a *paraklausithyron*, the address of the locked-out lover to his mistress outside her locked door, except that there is a substitute addressee, i.e., the door instead of the mistress herself (Cairns 1972: 230-31). Despite this superficial resemblance, however, this poem is not a true *paraklausithyron*; Lawrence Richardson points out that none of the basic elements of the

paraklausithyron are present (Richardson 1967: 425). Moreover, unlike other *paraklausithyra* this poem takes form of a dialogue; Kenneth Quinn describes it as a “dramatic duologue” (Quinn 1973: 368), and it is reminiscent of a scene from a comedy—but in elegiacs. To a great extent poem 67 is *sui generis* and without clear parallels in surviving Roman literature.

The other longer poems (61-66, 68) are all thematically linked, if somewhat tenuously in some cases, by the theme of marriage. Poem 67 is also concerned with marriage, albeit a scandalous one. Despite initially appearing out of place with the longer poems, on closer examination poem 67 both complements and contrasts with the surrounding poems, while at the same time it looks backward towards the iambic themes of the polymetrics and forward to the similar themes of the shorter elegiacs. Marilyn Skinner argues that poems 65-68b (the second part of 68) form a unit, the “Veronese Suite” (Skinner 2003: 29ff.). Moreover, Skinner suggests that poem 67, far from being the odd man out among the longer poems, is in fact “the unexpected fulcrum for the entire poetic trajectory” (Skinner 2003: 31), and that 65/66, 67, and 68 comprise a kind of poetic triptych, with poem 67 as the central (and thus most important) panel (Skinner 2003: 45).

Despite its seemingly eccentric position in the Catullan corpus and its unusual subject matter, a closer reading shows that Poem 67 is closely tied to the poems that precede and that follow it and that it echoes themes found both in the other long poems and in the entire poetic corpus. Its Callimachean overtones link it to the very Alexandrian poems that surround it. The setting of the poem in Verona gives a personal touch that reinforces Catullus’ personal references to the loss of his brother. It demonstrates many of the characteristics that make Catullus’ poetry at once Alexandrian and Roman, as well as the poet’s versatility, learning, and ability to paint a vivid and engrossing scene. It also continues and develops the theme of fidelity in love, or lack

thereof, which characterizes so many of the other poems in the corpus and helps give a sense of unity to the whole.

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