

The Woman Who Wasn't There: Catullus 13 and the Pose of Isolation

In exchange for Fabullus bringing the dinner, the female company, the wine, the banter, and the laughs to Catullus' party (13. 3-5), he is promised a perfume that the Cupids and Venuses gave to Catullus' girlfriend (11-12). Like the *sal* (5) that Fabullus is asked to bring, Catullus' poem contains much wit, but scholars disagree on precisely how it is witty: is the invitation a clever promise to Fabullus that the dinner will be worth it because he will get to sit next to the divinely-scented Lesbia (Vessey 1971), or an even more ingeniously clever, inside joke among Catullus, Fabullus, and Catullus' readers, where the *unguentum* is in fact vaginal secretions or something else sexual (Littman 1977 and Karakasis 2005)? These interpretations rely on the notion that Lesbia will be present at the party, Catullus' relationship with her is going well, and the *unguentum* is to be taken metaphorically. In my reading, Lesbia will not be there and the *unguentum* is literally a perfume. All that remains of Catullus' relationship with his *puella* at the present time is the perfume container, the *unguentarium*, that reminds him of her and all the Venuses and Cupids. This poem, then, is one of many in which Catullus highlights his friends' happy amorous state in contrast to his own isolation. In the process of demonstrating this reading, I will reassess c. 3, which is the only other Catullan poem in which the Venuses and Cupids appear together (3. 1). Poems 2 and 3, "the sparrow poems," like c. 13, have been interpreted in many diverse ways, including obscenely, where the sparrow is actually Catullus' penis (Jocelyn 1980 and Hooper 1985).

One of my findings will be that in Catullus, perfume is just perfume and the sparrow is just a sparrow. Frequently two very different Catulluses emerge from modern scholarship. The first Catullus leaves obscene riddles for his clever audience to figure out (Fontaine 2008), the second one is a poet of love and hate, just as he says in c. 85. This love runs the gamut from

subtle eroticism to lust, just as the hate ranges from jealousy to outrage. Both the lust and the outrage are often explicitly obscene, but it does not follow that the colors between the two extremes have to be obscene as well. This second Catullus, however, is not autobiographical, but expertly poetic, and just as clever as the first Catullus in expressing a full range of human feelings within such a limited medium: the poetry of personal relationships.

Catullus repeatedly achieves his poetic goals by striking a pose of isolation. By complaining that his friends are neglecting him or not sharing the details of their relationships, he draws attention to his own isolation (cf. cc. 6, 35, and 55). C. 13 is compelling precisely because it combines these two elements – Lesbia’s absence and Catullus’ demands for attention from a friend. Catullus conjures up images of a successful Roman dinner party (3-5). This particular dinner party, however, can only be realized if and when Fabullus comes to his house (2). The fact that Fabullus has to bring all of these items with him (3), although funny, highlights their absence from Catullus’ life. He has no great dinner, pretty girl, wine, wit, or laughter to offer. His excuse is that his wallet is full of cobwebs (7-8). The wallet represents both an absence of money and an indication of Catullus’ isolation. In the first half of the poem, Catullus lists what is absent from his house. (3-5). In the second half, he turns to what is present: an empty wallet (8) and an *unguentum* given to his girlfriend (11-12). Although the perfume was a present to Lesbia, there is no indication that she herself remains. Indeed, the list in the first half of the poem, emphasizing what Catullus is lacking, implies not only that great food, wine, wit, and laughter are absent, but also the presence of any *puella*. The final image is of Catullus, with his wallet full of cobwebs and an *unguentarium* full of a scented *unguentum* that reminds him of his *puella*, longing for a friend who is *venustus* (6), as Lesbia is *venusta* (c. 86), to bring him the

dinner parties and gaiety no longer in his home. C. 13, then, is not really about Fabullus or Lesbia, but in the end yet another poem about the persona of Catullus himself.

Bibliography

M. Fontaine, *QUCC* 89 (2008) 55-69.

R. Hooper, *G&R* 32 (1985) 162-78.

H. D. Jocelyn, *AJP* 101 (1980) 421-41.

E. Karakasis, *Collection Latomus* 287 (2005) 97-114.

R. Littman, *Latomus* 36 (1977) 123-28.

D. W. T. C. Vessey, *Latomus* 30 (1971) 45-55.