

Traditional Values in Catullus: Marriage is for Procreation

In poems 17 and 67, Catullus portrays childless couples. He mocks the husbands for their inability or unwillingness to produce children, and encourages the wives to look elsewhere to conceive children. Catullus echoes the theme of married fertility in other poems, notably 61 and 68b. Catullus even mentions the obligation to produce children in reference to couples that have already had children, or are newly married. Sometimes Catullus commands the couples in question to work hard to have children; in other instances he merely implies the importance of children, or describes the longed-for offspring of other couples. Along with the oblique mentions of children in 61 and 68b, the focus on procreation in 17 and 67 demonstrates Catullus' investment in traditional familial values with which he is not often associated.

My paper expands on David Wray's and Christopher Nappa's arguments that Catullus' poetry reflects and reinforces the values of its time, and Amy Richlin's work on Roman satirical criticisms of women. I also use Marilyn Skinner's argument that Catullus' similes often introduce a theme that is not literally germane to the events discussed in the poem.

Poems 67 and 17, which Skinner and Wray identify as related because both are set in Verona, are two of the clearest examples of Catullus' mockery of childless couples. In the notoriously complex plot of poem 67, it seems that the central female character has married an impotent young man whose father took his place in the marital bed, and that the wife later remarried to a Veronese man, with whom she acquired a child by theft rather than by childbirth. Catullus delights in mocking her first husband's sexual inadequacy (67.21-22), and does not spare the father-in-law (67.24-30). The woman, however, is never criticized. Throughout two unfruitful marriages, she is determined to have children by any means, and because she is so

committed to reproduction, Catullus tacitly pardons her infidelity and kidnapping, though she is clearly guilty of both.

The husband in poem 17 suffers from indifference more than impotence, but Catullus' attitude toward him is similar to that toward the impotent husband in poem 67. Catullus urges the indifferent husband to stop ignoring his young wife, whom the husband allows to "play as she pleases" (*ludere hanc sinit ut lubet*, 17.17). Given the sexual connotations of *ludere*, the husband has apparently given his wife *carte blanche* to commit adultery, but Catullus condemns his indifference rather than her infidelity. *Ludere [...] ut lubet* echoes Catullus' injunction to the newlyweds in 61, "play as is pleasing, and in a short time produce children" (*ludite ut lubet, et brevi / liberos date*, 61.204-5). The use of *ludere* in both passages compounds the significance of the old husband's indifference in poem 17: the wife attempts to have children while the husband shirks his marital duties. Catullus suggests that she is acting correctly, even though she violates the social norms that demand marital fidelity.

Poem 17 also contains a wistful simile, depicting a toddler in his father's arms (17.12-13). Although the explicit purpose of the simile is to compare the husband's obliviousness to that of a two-year-old, Catullus' choice of image dramatizes the husband's childlessness by showing the happy embrace of a hypothetical father and child. The two-year-old in the simile evokes the child that the childless man could have fathered, had he not squandered the opportunity by ignoring his wife.

A simile in poem 68b depicts an even more clearly coveted child, a grandson whose birth has provided an heir to a man who had only daughters without any sons (68.119-24). In this case, the mother has fulfilled her obligatory fertility to her father as much as to her husband. This

example shows that the woman is able to fulfill twin demands from the men in her family in that she accommodates both husband and father by having a son.

I propose that poems 17 and 67, compared to similar language in poem 61 and similar imagery in poem 68b, illuminate a view of marriage that is not often discussed in relation to Catullus. Scattered as they are across the corpus, these poems show that Catullus repeatedly advises married couples to have children, and to disregard their personal qualms or any lesser duties (including fidelity) that could prevent them from doing so.

Bibliography

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