

Catullus, Caesar, and the Foundations of Roman Ideology

I argue in this paper that Catullus' attacks on Caesar in Poems 57 and 11 serve to link sexuality and empire by associating Caesar and Mamurra with both extravagant imperialist aggression and pathetic receptivity (Konstan, 2000). Catullus implicitly critiques the decadence and corruption in Roman society and, at the same time, endorses the ethic of masculine aggression, epitomized by Caesar, Mamurra, and the Catullan lover himself. Indeed, Catullus attributes to Caesar and Mamurra the very qualities of wantonness and passivity associated throughout the Catullan corpus with the male narrator (Greene, 1995; Skinner, 1993). In assigning to Caesar some of the traits he reviles in himself, the speaker suggests not only a continuity between the spheres of the political and the erotic but also implies that his own subject position in relation to those spheres cannot be distinctly located.

Catullus also suggests, I would argue, that Roman masculinity is a fundamentally unstable concept (Janan, 2001; Wray 2002). This is evident in the fact that the putatively weak male lover in Catullus typically asserts his own masculinity by threatening to feminize other men (Williams 1999). Poem 16 (*pedicabo et irrumabo*) is a notorious example of this. In fact, one of the central assumptions of the ideology of Roman masculinity is that a man's status as *vir* is enhanced by his penetration of other males. By predicating the center of power in the Roman world on *both* domination and subordination, Catullus suggests that the perversion of traditional masculine and feminine roles may constitute a crucial dimension of Roman imperialist ideology.

While scholars have examined c.11 primarily in terms of the question of its unity and c. 57 in terms of its portrayal of sexual "deviance," critics have largely ignored the thematic connections between the two poems. My analysis will focus specifically on how the continuities

between Caesar and Lesbia in the two poems allows the Catullan lover to explore aspects of his own identity, as it may be defined in relation to a world in which political and erotic relations are conceived in terms of dominance and subordination. I will argue that the thematic elements c. 11 and c. 57 have in common help us to better understand how the Catullan narrator constructs for himself an identity fragmented by conflicting stances toward the world of erotic aggression and imperialism, epitomized by both Caesar and Lesbia.

In c. 11 Catullus describes the effects of Caesar's imperialistic endeavors as emblems of conventional Roman masculinity. Yet by focusing on the erotic character of Caesar's world of conquest and emphasizing an association of that world with the effeminate East, Catullus challenges the notion that the erotic and political can be conceived as opposites. Moreover, the slippage between Lesbia's erotic world and Caesar's political sphere suggests a subversion of the logic that differentiates Roman from non-Roman, virtue from "decadence," masculine from feminine (Janan, 2001). My paper will argue that Caesar and Lesbia are presented as complementary figures not only in their domination and subjugation of others, but also in the way they occupy both masculine and feminine subject/object positions. Catullus plays out a similar set of polarities for the poet/lover by depicting him as both a fragile flower-- a victim of a corrupt social order-- and as a powerful masculine subject competing in the aristocratic male arena (Habinek 1998). Finally, I will argue that the dynamic tension in Catullus' oscillating identifications with both dominant and marginalized culture becomes a vital element in Roman ideological discourse.

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