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READING CATULLUS 45 AS A PASTORAL SINGING COMPETITION

Catullus 45, a picturesque scene of idyllic love, strikes us as unique when juxtaposed against a corpus of poems illustrating the frustration and futility of such passion. We readers gaze on two lovers, Septimius and Acme, sharing a moment of ‘perfect felicity’ (Fordyce 1961: 205), or so it seems. To read Catullus 45 as an uncomplicated love vignette is to ignore the depth of allusion and the irony palpable in the rest of the Catullan corpus. Catullus appears to illustrate perfect love, but if we read this poem in the context of the Hellenistic pastoral amoebaeon song, new considerations come to light.

In this paper, I examine Catullus 45 as an amoebaeon song and explore the implications of such a reading in order to provide a framework for fitting this poem within the programme of Catullus’ corpus. If Septimius and Acme are competing, Love must be their judge, and he shows his favor by sneezing. Yet, he seems to sneeze indiscriminately, so who wins the contest? Is Septimius the better lover, or Acme? Is their love as blessed as the poet claims in his closing lines? Reading this poem alongside pastoral poetry, especially Theocritus’ *Idylls* 5 and 6, helps us answer these questions. I argue that Catullus casts Acme as the winner and, through the agon of the signing competition, implies that Septimius and Acme’s love is doomed. Furthermore, thematic echoes throughout the rest of the corpus align Catullus with Acme and Lesbia with Septimius. Catullus 45, which seems so perfect at first, turns out to be full of the bitterness, sarcasm, and pessimism we expect from Catullus.