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RHETORIC, WIT AND HUMOUR IN CATULLUS 44

SUMMARY: The paper analyses Catullus's c. 44, a witty and ironic poem on the frigidity of the rhetorical style of a certain Sestius'. The aim of the analysis is to point at the relationship between c. 44 and other Catullan poems concerning the themes of friendship/companionship and literature. Comic elements, especially in the presentation of Catullus' *parasitus*-like behaviour, will also be taken into account.

KEYWORDS: Catullus, parody, pastiche, rhetoric, Roman comedy, frigus

O funde noster seu Sabine seu Tiburs
(nam te esse Tiburtem autumant, quibus non est
cordi Catullum laedere; at quibus cordi est,
quovis Sabinum pignore esse contendunt),
sed seu Sabine sive verius Tiburs,
fui libenter in tua suburbana
villa, malamque pectore expuli tussim,
non inmerenti quam mihi meus venter,
dum sumptuosas appeto, dedit, cenas.
nam, Sestianus dum volo esse conviva,
orationem in Antium petitorem
plenam veneni et pestilentiae legi.
hic me gravedo frigida et frequens tussis
quassavit usque, dum in tuum sinum fugi,
et me recuravi otioque et urtica.
quare refectus maximas tibi grates
ago, meum quod non es ulta peccatum.
nec deprecor iam, si nefaria scripta

Sesti recepso, quin gravedinem et tussim
non mihi, sed ipsi Sestio ferat frigus,
qui tunc vocat me, cum malum librum legi.

O my estate, whether you are Sabine or Tiburtine (because some, who do not want to break Catullus' heart, assess that you are Tiburtine; and those who do, will bet anything that you are Sabine); anyway, whether you are Sabine or rather Tiburtine, I had a good time in your suburban villa and I got rid of bad cough from my chest. It was not undeserved: this cough my stomach gave me and I got it, pursuing a splendid dinner. As I want to be a guest at Sestius', I read his speech against the plaintiff Antius, a speech full of poison and pestilence. Then I was shaken by a heavy cold and coughing fits, until I ran back into your arms and cured myself with rest and with nettle. This is why, having recuperated, I give you many thanks, because you have not avenged my iniquity. And I do not pray now for anything but this: if I take up yet again Sestius' malicious writings, let the cold and the coughing fall not on me, but on Sestius himself, who now calls me to dinner because I read his evil book.[1]

Carmen 44, one of the less-known poems in the Catullan corpus,[2] is an interesting example of a rather elaborate intellectual joke. Catullus' victim is this time an orator and Catullus' would-be dinner host, Sestius. In preparation for the dinner, Catullus is (or just feels) obliged to read Sestius' speech against a certain Antius. This turns out to be a rather bad idea: as a result, the reader catches a severe case of cold and must retreat to his country villa, who is the nominal addressee of the poem, to recuperate. Catullus blames only himself for the illness – after all, it was his decision to read the wretched speech – but wishes, in turn, the same sickness on the author of the unfortunate composition, the very same author who now calls him to dinner: after all, Catullus has read his speech.

[1] The translation is mine and its aim is to render the poem as closely as possible, without any artistic ambitions; thus the peculiar word order in the translation of line 9, rendering Catullus' own emphatic placement of *dedit*.

[2] D. B. George's comment: *Catullus' poem on the frigidity of Sestius' style and the cold which the poet caught from it has attracted considerable scholarly attention* (George 1991: 247) seems rather an exaggeration, especially when one compares the amount of critical analyses of c. 44 and of other poems of Catullus (c. 5, c. 7, c. 51, to name only a few).

The poem itself presents a number of problems. The main point of interest for the critics seems to be the social situation in which Catullus finds himself: whether he has to read the poem (because otherwise he would not be invited to dinner) or does he just feel obliged to read it, being a polite man and/or a friend of the author (George 1991: 247-248; Sandy 1978). Apart from that, another issue which is often discussed is the problem of Sestius' rhetorical style and its possible parody in Catullus' poem: the question of Catullus' understanding of *frigus* in this case is an instrument which he uses to achieve the pastiche effect in his own poem (De Angeli 1969). The third problem is, of course, the poem's language itself and its possible models, whether legal (Ronconi 1953: 202f.) or religious ones (Heusch 1954: 47; Jones 1968) as well as its stylistics, especially the poet's use of archaisms (Heusch 1954). The genre of the poem (especially its relation to prayers, Jones 1968), its possible literary antecedents (Vine 2009, unconvincingly, on Hipponax's influence) and the presence of comic motifs (Sandy 1978) were also studied by scholars.

After a careful reading of the poem, the opinion of Fordyce, who sees c. 44 as *merely a vehicle for the pun on 'frigus'* (Fordyce 1961:197) seems rather questionable. Seemingly simple, the poem is in fact quite complicated in its form. Catullus often misdirects his readers and uses a number of literary tricks to obfuscate the meaning of his words. He starts the poem with a solemn, formal invocation to his *fundus,* the estate that belongs to him. The term *fundus* as such is interesting in this context. Together with a number of other forms, such as *grates, autumnant* or *recepso*, it adds to the formal, archaizing tone of the poem (Jones 1968: 379), especially that the invocation to the land gives the initial lines an epic tone which only later turns out to be a parody. This initial seriousness is stressed by the use of the exclamation *o funde*, especially if one accepts Jones' idea that the use of the formula with *o* in Catullan corpus is always used *to add gravity or urgency to an address or an exclamation* (Jones 1968: 381). The entire formula *o funde noster seu Sabine seu Tiburs* might, as Jones (Jones 1968: 381-382) suggests, have also an additional meaning, recalling the religious exclamation using two different names or appellations of a divinity-addressee of a supplication. This solemn, religious tone is immediately broken with

pedantic, legalistic debate on the proper geographical setting of the estate, which begins already in line 1: the tone of parody starts to prevail already at that point.

Interestingly, in addition to the language of religion and prayer, there seems to be another kind of literary game at play here as well: the association with or similarity to the Sirmio poems of Catullus. This connection, overlooked so far, it seems, by the critics, adds to the humour of the poem. Catullus himself more than once addressed in his poems the lands and places to which he felt attached. His invocations to Sirmio (*paeninsularum Sirmio insularumque ocelle*, c. 31, 1-2) and his comments on the return to the native land seem, at first, quite similar in tone to the invocation to *fundus*. The main difference lies in tone: the reader is in one case (c. 31) given a sincere, sentimental even, invocation to the beloved homeland of the speaker, while in the other (c. 44) the tone changes to that of a parody and literary joke. This paradoxical similarity is stressed by the fact that both poems start with a similar formula: a question concerning the true nature of the place. In the case of Sirmio in c. 31, Catullus suggests that it can be a treasure of either peninsulas or islands.[3] In the case of the estate in c. 44 the debate is ostensibly on the geographical location of Catullus' country retreat, but in fact it concerns the estate's value: those friendly to Catullus would believe it belonging to the fashionable Tiburtine region, while those who want to hurt his pride would believe the villa to be situated in Sabine lands, associated with tradition, frugality and old-fashioned country values[4] – everything a fashionable and worldly young man would like to avoid at all costs.

The archaizing tone and the allusions to *fundus Sabinus*, associated with traditional values is also rather comically enhanced by the mention of curing the cold, caught by Catullus while reading, with nettle (line 15). Nettle was traditionally associated with curing ailments associated with cold (Kavalali 2003: 14-16), especially coughing

[3] Antithesis (peninsula or island, the Neptunes of both salty and sweet water, Thynia and the Bithynian fields) in general seems a main formal principle in the poem; see McCaughey 1970.

[4] On the Sabine region, especially in the context of Horace's poetry, see Dang 2010; on the importance of the Sabina vel Tiburs in the poem see George 1991:248-9

(cf. Celsus, *Med*. 4.5.8.) and Catullus' mention of the therapy emphasizes the main concept of the poem: that of merging the general and medical meaning of *frigus* with the technical and rhetorical one. The mention of nettle here may also allude to yet another property of the plant, present in Greek writings: its effectiveness as an anti-poison agent, mentioned repeatedly by Nicander of Colophon in both his *Theriaca* (I 880-890) and *Alexipharmaca* (50-55, 200-205; see also Gow, Scholfield 1953: 219). In the context of line 12, where Catullus defines the speech he had read as *plenam veneni et petilentiae,* it seems rather probable that Catullus alludes here also to the facts known from Nicander, whose works were apparently quite widely read in 1st c. BC Rome (Fantuzzi, Hunter 2004: 465-466). Thus, it adds yet another layer to the set of meanings hidden in the poem. In addition to reminding the reader about the traditional Roman medicine, the mention of *urtica* suggests also, paradoxically, familiarity with Alexandrian learned poetry: something that one may well expect of Catullus as we know him.

The invocation to the estate is interesting also because it initially misdirects the reader, as it suggests that the poet's estate or his villa, located within it, will be the main topic of the poem. Such a belief may, indeed, be strengthened by the fact that lines 1-7 are dedicated to the description of the *fundus*, the *villa* and their beneficial influence on the poet's health. Once again the Sirmio poem comes to mind – and once again there are significant differences between the two. The main alteration, it seems, is the fact that while in c. 31 Sirmio remains the addressee and main theme throughout the poem, in c. 44 the invocation to *fundus* points the reader in the wrong direction. After all, the poem is not meant as a straightforward praise of the favourite spot's beauty or its beneficial influence on the health or mood of Catullus (as, indeed, is the case of c. 31). In c. 44 the praise of the *fundus* is ironic, multilayered. At first this compliment is presented as dependent not on the estate's intrinsic value, but on people's opinions; only later Catullus states that – whatever people may say – he finds his villa praiseworthy because that is where he felt better after he had caught the cold. And this cold, its origins and the man who was responsible for it soon replace the *fundus* and its *villa* as the main theme of the poem (to return, in the final part, once again to the *villa* and the *fundus*).

This second part of c. 44 introduces the other topic of the poem, connected with the first one by the motif of illness. In the first part of the poem Catullus was praising his estate for its healing properties: now we learn about the reasons of his bad health. Two motifs seem most prominent here: Catullus' own behaviour and the literary *frigus* of Sestius' speech.

Catullus claims that he had to read the oration of Sestius and that the invitation to dinner was his reason. This immediately brings to mind a comic stock character: a *parasitus*, whose main aim in life is to get, by all means necessary, a meal and (often) some wine and/or financial gratification.

The whole debate on whether the *fundus* is Sabine or Tiburtine in previous lines sets the stage for the game that Catullus plays with the *parasitus* concept. The fact that he clearly divides people in two groups: those who want to be unpleasant to him (and associate his property with the rustic and Sabine) and those without this malicious intent (who believe the villa and its surroundings to be fashionably Tiburtine) stresses the comic dilemma. Catullus here is a man whose position is rather precarious and who cares very much for appearances, yet who, apparently, must hunt for (*appeto)* invitations to *sumptuosas… cenas* (v. 9). Ostensibly, if he wants to be the guest of Sestius (*Sestianus… conviva*, v. 10), he needs to read his speech and repay for the invitation with – presumably – flattering remarks on the rhetoric composition of his host. Such an action would put him among the vast and varied class of *parasiti* – the garrulous, avaricious and constantly cajoling lower-class characters, in constant pursuit of a free meal (Duckworth 1952; Tylawsky 2002).

Catullus here clearly assumes a role of a peculiar kind of parasite: that of a poet-flatterer invited to judge (and, presumably, praise) the literary merits of his host's work. This type of character, actually, is not so typical for comedy as a genre as it is popular in literary anecdotes concerning poets and intellectuals, both famous and self-proclaimed ones, invited to comment on the literary production of the rich and famous.[5]

[5] Probably the most famous of these anecdotes is that of Dionysius of Syracuse, who (repeatedly) sent the poet Philoxenus to the quarries for criticizing his poetry. It is mentioned, in a form which is slightly different from the best-known one, by Diodorus

In these stories, it is usually the poet who comes out as the winner, due to his wit and his power over words, even though he criticizes the failed literary attempts of the patron. The joke, in this case, is on the patron rather than the "parasite" – and one may, indeed, read the poem of Catullus in similar vein. Yes, it is true that Catullus pays the price for his parasitic attempts: he catches a severe and deeply unpleasant cold and presents, in the poem, the exaggerated and rather comical version of his sufferings and the cure he needed. Yet the one who is presented here as more ridiculed is, arguably, Sestius: after all, in the world of Catullus, writing bad literature is one of the greatest crimes of all (see, e.g., c. 22, describing Suffenus, who might be *venustus*, *dicax* and *urbanus*, but who loses all these positive qualities when he starts writing his bad verses) and composing bad speeches certainly qualifies one to the ranks of failed writers.[6]

Catullus devotes a relatively large number of his poems to discussing poetry and writing in general. Some of them, like the allusive c. 105, describing Mentula/Mamurra's failed attempt to conquer Parnassus, deal with his enemies, some describe people, like the previously mentioned Suffenus, who are socially acceptable as long as they do not dabble in poetry. A number of these 'poems on poetry' deals with his friends writing poetry (c. 95, on Cinna's *Smyrna*), with himself composing poetry together with friends (c. 50, on the poetic exchange between Catullus and Licinius, cast in rather erotic terms), or, as in case of the infamous

(15.6.1-5), and later discussed in Greco-Roman imperial literature (e.g. Plut. *Alex. Fort.* 2.1.334c, Ael. *Ver. Hist*. 12.44). The material preserved is obviously post-Catullan, but Pauline LeVen (2014: 113-149) points at its origins from the time of Philoxenus and treats it as a valuable source for reconstructing literary debates at the time of Philoxenus. This type of anecdotes by itself seems to be sub-type of the narrative concerning the meeting between the wise man and the tyrant (see Gray 1986).

[6] But see also Sandy 1978, who associates Catullus in c. 44 with the type of *scurra* and provides numerous examples of *scurrilitas* from Augustan and early imperial Latin poetry. Sandy's point is that Catullus' behaviour – criticizing the writings of the host after he was invited – is presented as morally reprehensible *scurrilitas*; at the same time the whole situation is placed within the context of the late Republican practice of letting a circle of literary friends read and assess one's composition before publication. While the latter seems absolutely convincing, the former seems to neglect one feature typical for Catullus, which is his constant disdain for bad writers regardless of their social or political position.

c. 16, with the critique of Catullus' poetry by his friends. In case of the Sestius poem, the status of Sestius is rather difficult to define (Is he a friend? A patron? What exactly is the level of his familiarity with Catullus?), but the fact that literary topics are important for the poem is beyond doubt: both the theme of *fundus* and that of *frigus* ultimately play into the motif of writing and reading (bad) prose. And although we cannot be certain about the status of Sestius and whether we may safely call him a friend of Catullus, the poem does exhibit some features of the 'friendship poems', even if the friend in question is not Sestius. In the light of Baker's conclusions concerning c. 31 (Baker 1983) it is the *fundus* that can be read as a friend here. Baker understands c. 31 as a special kind of a poem on friendship, seeing Sirmio as an equivalent of the poet's friend. In the light of the conclusions presented above on the similarity of c. 31 and 44, this seems important not only for the Sirmio poem, but also in the context of c. 44.

The crucial idea of the literary-critical part of the poem, as mentioned above, is the play on the double meaning of *frigus*: both the cold that Catullus caught and its reason, the speech of Sestius, characterized by *frigus*, a rhetorical fault well known to the Roman theoreticians of Catullus' time. Cicero mentions it a number of times (*Brutus* 178.9-11. 236.9-12), but *frigus* (Greek *psychrotēs*) was a topic discussed in Greek rhetorical theory at least since Aristotle (*Rhet*. 1406a-1406b). The main features of literary *frigus* can be detected in the style of Catullus' poem (De Angeli 1969). Its bombastic beginning (expressed in *affected, stilted and inappropriate language*, De Angeli 1969: 355), contrasted with the more everyday language of the latter part, together with the stylistic mixture that this contrast of style creates, are typical features of a literary *frigus*. Thus the poem's language and style reflect the very vice which caused Catullus' cold. One may say that the curse of the cold is spreading: Catullus caught it and then wished it on the author who caused his discomfort, but ultimately, using the pastiche of *frigus* to show his audience what exactly was the fault of the speech he discusses, he gave it to those who heard or read his poem.

Brent Vine (2009) points at yet another possible stylistic significance of *frigus,* connecting the concept to the idea of chillingly cold weather, present in a number of preserved fragments of Hipponax. The

motif of cold would therefore suggest an additional level of intertextual exchange between Catullus and yet another representative of the great Greek masters of poetry. The idea seems very tempting – Hipponax's fame as an obscene poet as well as the reputation of being irascible and prone to angry outbursts would suit the role of a model for Catullus' literary persona very well. Still, Vine himself refutes some of his arguments (e.g. when pointing at the fact that the physical chill of the bad weather in Hipponax is a phenomenon which is altogether different from the cold which Catullus had caught) and the remaining ones seem rather unconvincing. It would seem that *frigus*, after all, is exactly what it seems to be: a rhetorical concept, illustrated by the poem's style and employed as a part of a joke played at the mediocre orator's expense.

One more thing may be stated here. We discussed before the interconnecting web of similarities and allusions that binds c. 44 with other poems within the oeuvre of Catullus: its links and similarities with the friendship poems, the poems on poetry and the poems connected to Sirmio. In case of the meaning of the *frigus*, one more association springs to mind: that with the *carmen* immediately following c. 44 in the current form of the Catullan corpus, the charming song on Acme, Septimius and Amor's cold. Mark Williams (Williams 1987) points rightly at the similarities between the style of the speech of Sestius, parodied in c. 44, and the bombastic, grandiose statements pronounced by Septimius in c. 45, seeing not only the first one, but both of them as practical, pastiche examples of literary *frigus* resulting in real-life colds: while the Sestian cold is enough to make a man sick, the one by Septimius affects even the god of love himself.

The above analysis shows convincingly, I hope, one particular thing: that in case of a Catullus' poem it is never safe to assume that it can only be read in one easy way. Scholars may disagree on the details of the interpretation of c. 44 and argue about the special importance of any of its facets, but, after reading it carefully, it would be difficult to still think about it as a simple vehicle on the pun of *frigus*.

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