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ALEKSANDRA KLĘCZAR
(JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY)

MADAME DOOR OF BRIXIA
THE MYSTERY OF CATULLUS 67

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SUMMARY: The text deals with Catullus' *carmen* 67, a problematic and unclear poem, set in Brescia and dealing with the motifs of marriage and infidelity. It analyses a number of problems crucial for the text: the question of its genre, the possible identity of the characters in this little domestic drama and the role of the addressee: the door of the family house.

Among Catullus' longer poems one of the more mysterious ones[1] seems to be c. 67: a rather lengthy conversation of the narrator with the personified door of a certain house in Brixia. Many of the poem's allusions and *double-ententes* are now lost to us, since, as Philippe Levine[2] points out, we are unable to identify the basic premise of the ridicule and the characters alluded to in the poem.

The topic seems, at first, rather obvious: the poem criticizes loose morals of a certain family, originating either from Verona or from

[1] Laguna, 2002, p. 13: "El poema 67 de Catulo es quizá de mas dificil de toda la obra conocida de poeta"; cf. also opinions of other scholars quoted by Laguna Mariscal in the same paragraph.

[2] Levine, 1985, pp. 62-71.

Brixia (modern day Brescia), of which Verona was a colony[3]; the door of the old family house, whom many critics identify with Catullus (which is not, I believe, as obvious and unproblematic as it seems[4]), tells the story to a passer by. The interpretation of details is uncertain, but in any case, the whole matter describes a provincial affair, fully understandable perhaps for the inhabitants of Brescia and Verona and for people, who, like Catullus himself, were of local origin. For modern readers both the reconstruction of family affairs described here and their interpretation are still rather problematic: Frank O. Copley might have boldly stated that the story told in the poem was easy to decipher, as it related a crude and rather straightforward history of adultery,[5] but the case, as I shall argue, seems rather more complicated.

It would be worthwhile to delineate the story as it is told by the door to the passer-by. The door (and the entire house) used to belong to an old man (*senex*); while he owned the house, the door was carefully guarding it (v. 3-4). Later, however, when the old man died (*porrecto sene*, v. 6) and his son got married (*facta marita*, v. 6) the door started be repeatedly accused by the citizens of Brixia: supposedly, it was not guarding the new wife's virtue properly (v. 14). The door then proceeds to describe the new lady of the house. Contrary to the popular opinion, she was not a virgin when the younger owner of the house married her. It is true that her previous marriage had remained unconsummated, due to the fact that her first husband was impotent. Nevertheless, during that marriage she did enjoy a fully consummated sexual relationship – one with her father-in-law, who had replaced his impotent son in the young wife's bedroom (v. 19-28). Such a union was scandalous in the eyes of the Roman society, since it brought on the accusations of incest and familial impiety.

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[3] Catullus 67, 34: "Brixia Veronae mater amata meae."

[4] Cf. Levine, 1985, p. 63, n. 9

[5] Copley, 1949, pp. 245-53, see especially p. 246: "Actually, the poem is not a riddle at all. It tells a simple, straightforward, and not very pretty tale of adultery and cuckoldry, involving a man, his son, the son's wife, and the wife's various lovers"; Ernst Badian (1980, pp. 81-89) answers Copley with a sarcasm worthy of Catullus himself, suggesting that "it is only lack of sensitivity to the language and style of the poet that produces this clarity" (*ibidem*, p. 83).

Copley, quoted above, is fully convinced that there is only one father-son pair mentioned in this story; in other words, he believes that the husband-son and the lover-father are identical with the owners of the Brixia house. He suggests that the unfaithful lady, before she even got to marry the son, had two love affairs: an unconsummated one, with the son, her future husband, and a consummated one, with his father, the *senex* and first master of the house.[6] It does not, however, seem as obvious as Copley would like to see it, if not for any other facts, then because of the way the *senex* is characterized. Both the door and its interlocutor seem to have respect for the original master, the *senex*, while the adulterous father-in-law, who defiled his son's young bride, is described in strong, condemning, even derogatory terms (*conscelerasse*, *impia mens*, *comminxerit in gremio*). The scandalous love affairs with the father-in-law might have happened, as many scholars believe, in the previous marriage of the lady.[7]

Whatever the case, the wife was not an innocent, chaste *matrona*. The city of Brixia, as the door tells the passer-by, knows also of her love affair (*adulterium*) with certain Cornelius and Postumius (v. 35) and with a mysterious and dangerous man with red eyebrows (v. 46), whose name the door never mentions, but who is identified as a person connected to a recent judicial case of simulated pregnancy and birth (v. 47-48).

To propose an interpretation of the poem and its characters, it is necessary, I believe, to ask about its genre. The scholars are far from consensus on that case. Copley[8] sees in c. 67 a rather straightforward and simple *diffamatio*; he mentions that according to the tradition of the genre, the main aim of such a text is to offend and discredit the persons described, in this case the Balbi: the impotent husband, the lecherous

[6] Copley, 1949, p. 246.

[7] The recounting of the scholarly debate on the identity of the characters can be found in Levine, 1985, pp. 65-66.

[8] Copley, 1949, p. 245.

father and the unfaithful wife.[9] While Copley is, in my opinion, right about the presence of the *diffamatio* trope in the poem, I do believe that the case of the poem's genre is slightly more complicated.

Copley himself does mention, in his work on *amator* in Latin love poetry,[10] a possible importance of one more genre for the interpretation of the poem. The genre in question is *paraclausithyron* – or rather, in Copley's interpretation, a simplified and vulgarized form of the genre. The *paraclausithyron* as such is usually a song sung by a lover waiting at the locked door of his beloved; it often includes elements of interaction (dialogue, address, flattery, cursing, threats) with the personified door. The vulgarized form of the genre, according to Copley, is a result of it being appropriated by Roman popular culture: a form of serenade, sung at the door of the beloved and known from Plautine comedy, has gained popularity but changed the character, becoming, rather than an expression of feelings, a sarcastic critique shouted at the doors of notoriously unfaithful women, whose gates were opening too often to admit secret lovers. It all seems plausible and convincing, yet there is one main problem with this hypothesis: the only poem that would fit a genre such defined, is Catullus 67 and we have no other mention, no trace of any similar compositions. It seems more convincing to try and understand the poem as a kind of literary game with the conventions of *paraclausithyron.*

As Murgatroyd rightly assumes, c. 67 is "a poem set at the door, largely concerned with a female inmate (whether present or past) of the house and with a pronounced erotic element".[11] All of those are clear markings of a *paraclausithyron*. It is, however, enough to look at Catullus' text and compare it to the *paraclausithyron* poems of Propertius or Tibullus to notice how atypical is Catullus' treatment of the

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 246: "this is the tale which a careful, unprejudiced reading of the poem discloses, a clear, consistent story that is simplicity itself, and is calculated to do just what Catullus wanted to do: to hold up to shame and derision the impotent husband, his lecherous father, and his wanton wife. It is a story which would be grasped at once by its readers, without the help of a single explanatory note; it is certainly a story well devised to rouse the knowing snicker and the covert leer. In short, it is a perfect diffamatio."

[10] Copley, 1956, pp. 47-51.

[11] Murgatroyd, 1989, p. 472.

conventions and motifs of the genre.[12] The very tone of the poem is different: usually a *paraclausithyron* is a love poem, and while in c. 76 erotic motifs do appear, the poem as such is most definitely not a love poem; it would even be hardly possible to argue that it represents any kind of positive or romantic attitude to love.[13] Yes, it does present a typical situation: a conversation between a man and the door of a woman's house; but while in a *paraclausithyron* a would-be lover begs the door to open, in c. 67 the door should remain firmly locked to the potential love interests of the lady. Moreover, in a *paraclausithyron* the lover is criticizing the door for not letting him in and for guarding the virtue of the lady too jealously; conversely, in the poem of Catullus the door complains that it has been unjustly criticized by the inhabitants of Brixia for not being diligent enough in their care for the lady's proper behaviour and for standing wide open to let the lovers in (the erotic subtext present in the use of the open/closed metaphor seems fully consciously used here). Also, unlike in a typical *paraclausithyron*, the passer-by addresses the door in a rather civil and friendly, if a little patronizing, manner; the door can only complain on the behaviour of the Brixian citizens, not its interlocutor, who, while interested in gossip and eager to hear what the citizens say, shows no sign of sharing their low opinion on the door's morals.

Most importantly, however, a *paraclausithyron*, with its emphasis on the lover's plight, on clandestine love affairs and the need for the door to open and thus break the orders of the master of the house, challenges the traditional morality and traditional order of things, encouraging improper behaviour and breaking of the rules. No such thing takes place in c. 67. In fact, the poem is closer to affirming traditional Roman values than contesting them, as the door of the house is criticizing the lady's immoral conduct and defending the institution of marriage; a practice, one may add, not unfamiliar from the corpus of Catullan long poems. The interlocutor does not, in my opinion, seem to have any elements of the *exclusus amator* character, a lover whom the door would not allow in: he does not seem to be eager to get inside and nothing in

[12] On *paraclausithyron* as genre cf. e.g. H. V. Canter, The Paraclausithyron as a Literary Theme, *The American Journal of Philology* 1920, Vol. 41, No. 4, p. 355-368.

[13] Murgatroyd, 1989, p. 472.

his actions indicates that he would like to seek an appointment with the lady.[14]

C. 67 seems, then, a consciously and carefully plotted *diffamatio*, planned to offend and criticize the mores of a certain family and composed in a form alluding to a popular genre of *paraclausithyron*, but reversing many of its typical characteristics. Catullus may have found the concept of the dialogue with the door specially interesting, since he generally seemed to have a predilection (inherited from some of his Hellenistic models, perhaps?) for letting inanimate objects speak in his poems (the *phasellus* in c. 4, the lock of Berenice in c. 66).[15]

There is an interesting phrase that Catullus uses to describe a change in the family history. Asking about the events of the past, the interlocutor states at some points that the door has got married, became a wife[16] (*facta marita,* w. 6). Such a usage does not seem to be an invention of Catullus, but rather based on an expression already present in Latin, *domus marita*.[17] This line as such is badly preserved in the sources and its present form is a result of conjecture,[18] which makes the interpretation of the line even more difficult. Is the *door becoming a married woman* a metaphor for the landlord's own change of marital status or is it a simple case of saying *ianua marita* instead of *ianua mariti*? The issue was rather lively debated by scholars (first and foremost, in Ernst Badian's article mentioned above) and the matter seems far from resolved. Nevertheless, what does seem obvious is the fact that the door of the house of Balbi is treated as a person, not an object – albeit a person whose social status is not easy to determine.

Some critics see the door as a personage resembling a proper Roman *matrona*. This can be justified by the use, in the first lines of the poem, of terms such as *iucunda*, resembling the terms used to address

[14] Levine (1985, p. 70), sees the whole conversation in a completely different light, interpreting the poem as Catullus' revenge on an unmarried Brixian woman, who has spurned him and his erotic proposals; Levine does not, however, give any convincing arguments to support his reading.

[15] Cf. also *ibidem*, p. 69f.

[16] Cf. Laguna, 2002, p. 40-45.

[17] Cf. Liv. 27, 31, 4: "vagabatur enim cum uno aut altero comite *per maritas domos* dies noctesque" and Censorinus, *De die natali* III, 3: "in domibus quae essent maritae."

[18] Badian, 1980, pp. 81-89.

brides or young wives[19]; a similar meaning can possibly be attached to the phrase *facta marita*, quoted above, as well as *tradita*, which is here used for the description of the door's status.[20] The concept of a door as a wife is, however, difficult to defend, if one takes into account the entire poem. It seems more convincing to treat the door, as Badian does,[21] as a figure of a house slave, accused by the public (justly or not) of disloyalty towards the household. The first lines could then be treated as a double game, played at the expense of both the reader (mislead as to the identity of the narrator's interlocutor) and the character of the door herself (treated, for a short while, as a lady, while in fact she is, at best, a servant). Understanding the door of the Brixia house as a typical comic character of a garrulous slave, prone to gossiping and believing him-/herself above the rest of the servants is not Badian's original idea[22]; nevertheless, he was the one to suggest a convincing explanation for the contrast between the treatment of door in v. 1-2 and the following part of the poem; his explanation, outlined above, fits very well in the generally ironic mood of the entire *carmen*.

The slave-door seems, as we stated, talkative and is more than glad to repeat salacious rumours about his masters' family (w. 19-29). He/she seems willing to share the details of domestic life and scandals with a passer-by. Furthermore, the interlocutor/narrator, commenting on the door and talking to him/her, uses terms such as *servisse*, *dominus*, *deseruisse fidem*, which bring to mind immediately the life of slaves.

What kind of slave is our door? Lines 38-40 suggest that he/she might be a *ianitor*, a slave chained to the door of the house to guard them (thus my choice of using *him/her* about the door; *ianua* is feminine, but the function was usually reserved for male slaves[23]). Both the erudite allusions in v. 31-33 and the use of sophisticated language seem to be a part of the same strategy, as they strengthen the comic character of the exchange and stress the high opinion that the slave-door has about him-/herself. Thus, the dominating features of the door character

[19] Wiseman, 1969, p. 22: "Catullus' address to the house-door itself is in terms more appropriate to a bride."

[20] Cf. Murgatroyd, 1989, p. 473f.

[21] Badian, 1980, pp. 81-82.

[22] Cf. Murgatroyd's discussion of *status quaestionis* (1989, p. 473-476).

[23] Cf. Ovid., *Am.* 1, 6.

add to the general comic atmosphere of the poem. It is easy, however, to overstress the significance of such elements, as it is, I believe, in the case of Levine, who suggests a connection between the present poem and *versus fescennini* and interprets c. 67 as a wedding song by ascribing special significance to the phrase *facta marita*.[24] There is nothing, it seems, to justify such a connection and to treat c. 67 as a nuptial song; rather, the comic and at times indecent character of the poem shows some associations with the traditionally lewd nuptial songs.

The most mysterious part is the final one, where the speaker makes an obscure allusion to the last lover of the door's mistress, a mysterious man with red eyebrows,[25] as well as to some undefined judicial case concerning simulated pregnancy and false birth that the man in question was associated with. Both the identity of the man and the case that is alluded to remain a mystery; the opinions of scholars vary from speculating that a red-browed man was a victim of an unspecified woman, striving to accuse him of either seduction or rape (and thus possibly force him to marry her?) to suggesting the whole intrigue was designed as an extortion attempt, due to the peculiarities of Roman inheritance law.[26] The allusions and suggestions in the poem itself, however, seem too tenuous and too obscure to help us solve the legal and personal riddle concerning this character and his actions.

Carmen 67 is not the easiest poem to interpret. What seems certain is the aggressive and ironic character of the poem, a significant presence of motifs taken from comic tradition and the play with genres. The rest, it would seem, from the identity of characters presented in the poem to the details of legal cases suggested in it, must probably remain an unsolvable riddle.

[24] Levine, 1985, p. 65.

[25] Note, however, that Merrill speculates that the feature described here does not have to mean that the man's eyebrows were red; He suggests the meaning „brow, reddened due to anger" (Merrill, 1951, p. 177).

[26] Cf. Levine, 1985, pp. 66-67.

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