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Between Learnedness and Performance

Catullus and the Tradition of Iambic Poetry

ABSTRACT: As a key figure in neoteric poetry, Catullus is known for his finely crafted, allusive poems influenced by Alexandrian aesthetics. However, the Greek archaic tradition, particularly iambic poetry, also played a significant role in shaping his work. Although only a few of his poems use iambic meter, the aggressive, satirical spirit of iambic poetry permeates much of his corpus. This tradition, rooted in ritual practices and social settings such as the cult of Demeter and Dionysus or symposia, centered on the sharp condemnation of misconduct within a shared moral community. The paper investigates whether some of Catullus's invective poems might have been intended for similar performative contexts. It is structured in three parts: 1) an overview of iambic poetry's origins and ritual associations; 2) an analysis of selected Catullan poems; and 3) a comparison of Catullus's invective with archaic models, focusing on targets of criticism, performance contexts, and their implications.

KEYWORDS: Catullus, Neoteric poetry, Iambic tradition, Literary invective, Performativity

Catullus' vision of poetry is based on Alexandrian ideas of carefully crafted, preferably short poems, full of intricate allusions and unconventional motifs. It is crucial, however, to acknowledge the influence of the Greek archaic tradition on his poetry and to extend the parallels and sources beyond the Catullan inspiration drawn from Sappho. One

of the aspects that can be traced is the influence of iambic poetry and its tradition. Of the 116 poems attributed to Catullus, only 12 are in iambic meter, but the ‘spirit’ of this type of poetry is evident throughout the corpus. The poet is deeply immersed in the socio-political landscape of the Late Republic and does not miss the opportunity to make a sharp commentary on specific people and situations. Interestingly, the key aspect of early iambic poetry was brutal condemnation of misconduct. This action was intended as friendly gesture, executed in a circle of people that share values and perspectives. But could we assume that some of Catullus’ poems were intended to be performed in a similar way and have the same effect on their recipients? This paper explores Catullus’ engagement with the iambic tradition, tracing the analogies between his work and the original contexts of the genre. First, I will consider the theories of the sources of iambic poetry and its original performative aspects. Then, after placing Catullus’ poetry in the context of sympotic and public invective, I will analyze the iambic connections in 3 selected poems of Catullus. Finally, I will point out some similarities between archaic iambic poetry and the contexts of Catullan works in terms of the addressees of literary invective, as well as the possibilities and/or necessities of performance in this kind of poetry.

Theories on the sources of iambic poetry

To better understand the true social and performative connotations in iambic poetry, it is crucial to trace its beginnings and original contexts. The word *iambos* is generally considered to be pre-Greek, usually of non-Indo-European origin.¹ Its real meaning together with origin, were the subject of speculations since antiquity: according to the most common ancient theory, the terms *iambos* and *iambeion* are derived from *iambizein*, which is further explained by “to abuse” and “to vituperate” (e.g., by Aristotle).² This is a rather special aspect explaining the character of this literary genre: as Martin West observed, the name does not automatically imply the specific use of a metre, but the

¹ Rotstein 2009: 117–118.

² Rotstein 2009: 119.

character of a poem.³ Some modern etymologies on the other hand, suggest the strong connotation with cult: *iambos* could mean a ritual dance (Brandenstein) or a song (Versnel), a designation of a person or a type of composition (West), a ritual cry in apotropaic or purifying rites (Kretcher and Theander), or even, surprisingly, a eulogy, praise (Janda).⁴

From these potential theories about the origin of the iambus, its key character emerges strongly from the very beginning: a ritually characterized piece aimed at some kind of purification. The last reassurance of that statement could be found in an aetiological myth of iambus: the figure of Iambe, presented, for example, in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* (*Hom. Dem.* 200–205):

ἀλλ' ἀγέλαστος, ἄπαστος ἐδητύος ἡδὲ ποτῆτος
 ἦστο πόθῳ μινύθουσα βαθυζώνοιο θυγατρός,
 πρὶν γ' ὅτε δὴ χλεύης μιν Ἰάμβη κέδν' εἰδυῖα
 πολλὰ παρασκώπτουσ' ἐτρέψατο πότνια γέννη,
 μειδῆσαι γέλασαι τε καὶ ἴλαον σχεῖν θυμόν·
 ἦ δὴ οἱ καὶ ἔπειτα μεθύστερον εὖαδεν ὀργαῖς.

Unsmiling, tasting neither food nor drink,
 she [Demeter] sat wasting with desire for her deep-girt daughter,
 until knowing Iambe jested with her and
 mocking with many a joke moved the holy goddess
 to smile and laugh and keep a gracious heart—
 Iambe, who later pleased her moods as well.⁵

The old woman distracts the goddess despairing over the loss of the kidnapped Kore through jests (χλεύης;) and mockery (παρασκώπτουσ', σκώπτειν; with accusative means 'mock, jeer, scoff at'). The passage, however, suggests laughter emerging from playful jests without any targets being identified. The method by which Demeter's reaction is elicited remains unspecified. It's the explanatory nature of the scene

³ West 1974: 22.

⁴ Rotstein 2009: 117–118.

⁵ Translation by H.P. Foley.

that prompts scholars to interpret Iambe's jests and teasing as referencing verbal obscenity.⁶

As Christopher Brown argues, iambus could have been an integral part of the cult of Demeter or Dionysus in two forms: as an agon during a religious festival or as a kind of ritual pantomime.⁷ The description of iambic invective during the Dionysian cult, a public abuse of the audience by the performers, was passed down by Semus of Delos, whose description survived in fragments as a quote by Athenaeus (Athen. 14.622a–d):

Σῆμος δ' ὁ Δῆλιος ἐν τῷ Περὶ Παιάνων, οἱ αὐτοκάβαλοι, φησί, καλούμενοι ἐστεφανωμένοι κιττῷ σχέδην ἐπέραινον ῥήσεις· ὕστερον δὲ ἱαμβοὶ ὠνομάσθησαν αὐτοὶ τε καὶ τὰ ποιήματα αὐτῶν.
(...) εἴτα προτρέχοντες ἐτόθαζον οὓς προέλοιντο. στάδην δὲ ἔπραττον.

Semos the Delian says in his book about Paeans: "The men who were called αὐτοκάβαλοι used to wear crowns of ivy, and they would go through long poems slowly. But at a later time both they and their poems were called Iambics. (...) And then, advancing, they used to ridicule with their jests whoever they chose."⁸

These two early connotations of iambic poetry, that is description by Semus and the *aition* of Hymn, are connected by one indication. In both cases the act of reversion plays major role: in the myth of Demeter, mockery is performed to restore the normal order of nature, in the Dionysian ritual, the performers must suspend the normal rules of human interaction to honor the god properly. It brings us to the conclusion that the iambic reversal is practiced to reinforce traditional structures. In this image, the poet appears as the protector of a community who must identify the villain and destroy his public reputation.

⁶ Rotstein 2009: 170.

⁷ Brown 1997: 39–40.

⁸ Translation by C.D. Yonge.

Parallel contexts: archaic Greek symposia and Roman public oratory

It is important to mention the fact, that ancient sources confirm, that iambic poetry was associated by Greeks also with another area of life, that is social gatherings and symposia. We are reassured on that matter not only by the tradition (associating, for example, a prominent figure in iambic poetry, Archilochus, with sympotic poetry), but also by Aristotle, who warns the youth of attending symposia before reaching the adult age, because iambs declaimed during the gatherings are too obscene and immoral for a young person.⁹ Krystyna Bartol in her research gives us an insight to the particulars of iambic performance during the symposium: it could even resemble the dramatic performance, with gestures, facial movements, declamation and singing.¹⁰ These occasions had a less formal character than cult rites and brought together people with similar backgrounds, interests, views, and common ties.

As can be seen in the case of the symposia, invective was an important part of social life in ancient Greece. However, the Romans also frequently resorted to it as a formative element of public life. Sharp, personal mockery of an opponent was present primarily in political debate. One of the most common practices of invective was the use of *cognomina* that is mocking nicknames or meaningful names. Cognomina were used primarily to ridicule public figures holding office or attending the Senate.¹¹

Analysis of selected poems by Catullus

Placing Catullus' poetry in a broader social context facilitates the understanding of his intentions, but the examination of the strategies that are used in his poems. Mocking an opponent with a *cognomen* turns out to be one such practice. However, to look for specific examples of Catullus' iambic poetics, let's now look at his poems – two metrically

⁹ Bartol 1992: 66.

¹⁰ Bartol 1992: 68.

¹¹ Ingleheart 2014: 54.

iambic and one that, although uses a different meter, fits into the iambus aesthetically and ideologically.

C. 40

Qvaenam te mala mens, miselle Ravide,
 agit praecipitem in meos iambos?
 quis deus tibi non bene advocatus
 vecordem parat excitare rixam?
 an ut pervenias in ora vulgi?
 quid vis? qualubet esse notus optas?
 eris, quandoquidem meos amores
 cum longa voluisti amare poena.

What infatuation, my poor Ravidus, drives you headlong in the way of my iambs? What god invoked by you amiss is going to stir up a senseless quarrel? Is it that you wish to be talked about? What do you want? would you be known, no matter how? So you shall, since you have chosen to love my lady,—and long shall you rue it.¹²

This poem is an example of an acute but subtle attack on the other admirer of poet's lover. The action of the opponent is presented as something unpredictable and unreasonable, *mala mens*. Unidentified man is accused of madness because of his exposition by risky behavior that destabilizes fixed relation between two other people. As readers we cannot confirm his identity, because of the phonetic play that the poet wants to offer us. The name Ravidus sounds very similar to Latin word *rabidus*, meaning raging, frenzied or mad. This action resembles a rhetorical practice – the name is clearly invented to better complement the personal invective.¹³ Tormented poet tries to regain power by undermining the opponent's stability. Another accusation put on Ravidus is the outrageous desire for fame at any cost, which the opponent can obtain by appearing in the poems of the wronged poet (*an ut pervenias in ora vulgi? / quid vis? qua libet esse notus optas?*). Catullus is cruel, but because Ravidus, this untamed individual, now

¹² All poems of Catullus translated by F.W. Cornish.

¹³ Ingleheart 2014: 60.

deserves a punishment in form of a public mockery. To rise above crazy Ravidus, Catullus presents himself as stable and learned: he intentionally imitates in construction and literary concept Archilochus' poem about a mad Lycambes.

In another poem, Catullus storms off with more outrageous behavior, but this time he becomes even more cruel in his commentary:

C. 59

Bononiensis Rufa Rufulum fellat
uxor Meneni, saepe quam in sepulcretis
vidistis ipso rapere de rogo cenam,
cum devolutum ex igne prosequens panem
ab semiraso tunderetur ustore.

Rufa of Bononia puts her lips to her Rufus, Rufa, Menenius' wife, whom ye have often seen in the graveyard grabbing the baked meats from the very pyre, and whilst reaching for a loaf rolling down out of the fire getting walloped by a half-shaven corpse-burner.

Rufa is condemned by Catullus for several behaviors both explicitly and implicitly. Derived sexual practices and stealing gifts from funeral pyres are not the only ones. Rufa is in the first line of the poem ridiculed for the oral sex with Rufulus: their names are very similar and can suggest kinship, and further – an incestuous relationship between the targets of the invective. But the spiral of cruelty does not stop here. The pun becomes even more acute because of its additional bilingual connotations.¹⁴ Andreas Michalopoulos remarks that the name is not necessarily real, given the description of Rufa as a fellatrix: her name is associated with a Greek verb ροφέω, meaning 'to suck'. Once again in this narrative, his virulence goes hand in hand with intellectual superiority. Rufa is attacked for a form of vice. Catullus, like many of his predecessors, shames culturally forbidden sexual acts.

The last poem I'm going to analyze today, although iambic only in its spirit, also creates the image of the poet as a commentator on the

¹⁴ Ingleheart 2014: 63.

community, who bluntly, but for right reasons, criticizes behavior that violates norms.

C. 114

Firmano saltu non falso Mentula dives
fertur, qui tot res in se habet egregias,
aucupia omne genus, piscis, prata, arva ferasque.
nequiquam: fructus sumptibus exsuperat.
quare concedo sit dives, dum omnia desint.
saltum laudemus, dum modio ipse egeat.

Cock is truly said to be rich in the possession of the grant of land at Firmum, which has so many fine things in it, fowling of all sorts, fish, pasture, cornland, and game. All to no purpose; he outruns the produce of it by his expenses. So I grant that he is rich, if you will allow that he lacks everything. Let us admire the advantages of his estate, so long as he himself hasn't a bean.

Once again, the main character of the poem hides in his special nickname, but this time it can be identified as a particular person. This *cognomen* – *Mentula Firmanus* – provides us with the only sexual allusion in the entire poem. Mamurra is a recurring persona in the poly-metric cycle within the Catullian corpus, whose immoral behavior becomes the subject of attacks on both himself and his mistress Ameana.¹⁵ His special name this time is rather an indicator allowing the readers or listeners of this poem to identify who is the recipient of the invective. The choice of his name is, of course, an attack itself, but it does not seek to significantly attract attention or stigmatize any obscenity. Mamurra is therefore presented as a personal rival but condemned in a broader social perspective. Catullus surrounds his invective with praise of the magnificent estate owned by Mamurra, which makes his criticism sharper. The opponent is a greedy and wasteful man – despite his high role in society, he does not behave like a statesman and does not uphold morality. Catullus, with his commentary, stigmatizes such

¹⁵ Klęczar 2013: 103–104.

behavior and exposes Mamurra's true personality. He argues that his nickname becomes fully deserved.

Analogies with the original iambic context

As was pointed out in my short analysis, significant names are almost certainly fictional, and their main purpose is to mark the characteristics of a mocked person. Insults with sexual connotations are used as a crucial element of the iambus but executed in a particularly cruel and obscene way to express the strong character of the iambic condemnation. These elements carry a general charge rather than a personal bite – this aspect differentiates Catullus from the Greek poets who create iambic poetry that directly and openly mocks their opponents.

Catullus combines in his poems two different registers: a complex literary program of erudition and *urbanitas* and the social practice of shaming the outsiders who do not conform to contemporary mores. But to preserve his literary ideas, and at the same time have the intended effect on the recipient, the act of presenting the poem is crucial. Can we assume that Catullus read his works in public and created his own performance of invective? Marilyn Skinner argues, after Paul Veyne, that the poems of Catullus could be monologues to be declaimed.¹⁶ The argument in favor of that speculation is for example the key role of phonetics in Catullus' poems. Moreover, the attempt of narrative control in a feud with a personal enemy was an integral tool not only in iambic poetry, but also in publicly conducted debate.

At the same time, the poet's personal conflicts are sanctioned by him in a social context: the poet's voice always becomes the voice of the morals and rules of his social circle. Taking this stance brings Catullus closer to cult practices in honor of Dionysus and the jokes of *Iambe*. The shocking attack, while adhering to certain literary (almost ritualistic) rules, reverses the norms of human interaction for a while, to identify defective individuals and bring them to submission. Catullus thus covers with his vision of iambic poetry the most important aspects that shaped its form throughout antiquity.

¹⁶ Skinner 1993: 62.

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