

MYRRH AND UNGUENTS IN THE *COMA BERENICES*

οὐ τάδε μοι τοσσήνδε φέρει χάριν ὅσον ἐκείνης  
 ἀσχάλλω κορυφῆς οὐκέτι θιζόμενος,  
 ἦς ἄπο, παρθενίη μὲν ὅτ' ἦν ἔτι, πολλὰ πέπωκα  
 λιτά, γυναικείων δ' οὐκ ἀπέλαυσα μύρων.

Callimachus *Aetia* 4 fr. 110, Pfeiffer, 75–78

non his tam laetor rebus, quam me afore semper,  
 afore me a dominae vertice discrucior,  
 quicum ego, dum virgo quondam fuit, omnibus expers  
 unguentis, una vilia multa bibi.

Catullus 66.75–78

Readers of Catullus 66, when comparing lines 77–78 with the Greek original, have long felt that something was missing. Fordyce<sup>1</sup> sums up the problem: “The contrast here, as in Hymn 5.15, 25, is between the χρήματα λιτά or ἄμεικτα which the girl uses and the more elaborate μεικτά of the married woman . . . if *omnibus* is right, *unguenta* has not the epithet which is needed to correspond to γυναικείων and contrast with *uilia*.” Pfeiffer<sup>2</sup> suspected *omnibus* (“desideratur vox quae voci γυναικείων correspondeat”); Axelson<sup>3</sup> grudgingly accepted it (“so gestattet doch das Metrum nur ein daktylisches Attribut mit vokalischem Anlaut und konsonantischem Auslaut, und über ein so beschaffenes Wort mit dem erforderlichen Sinne verfügt die lateinische Sprache nicht”), but insisted on replacing *una* with Morel’s *nuptae* in order to achieve the desired contrast. He then comments: “wenn wir nicht in die Irre gegangen sind, hätte also Catull die Locke vom Scheitel Berenikes sagen lassen: ‘zusammen mit dem ich, nach ihrer Heirat aller Parfüme beraubt, einst, als sie noch Jungfrau war, viele Tausende (von Parfümen) getrunken habe [reading *milia* for *vilia*].”<sup>4</sup>

Clausen<sup>5</sup> has rightly felt that there is no need for emendation in the phrase, which he defends on the grounds that Catullus, by using the word *dominae* in line 76 (to render Callimachus’ ἐκείνης in line 75) has already provided a contrast for *virgo*. This is an excellent observation. I intend here to defend *omnibus* further by showing that, with regard to sense, Callimachus’ γυναικείων was superfluous. It does act as a contrast to παρθενίη, but Catullus had already taken care of that contrast with *dominae*, as Clausen shows. I believe that a better understanding of the implications of *omnibus expers unguentis* will remove any lingering doubts about the sufficiency of the phrase.

In order to understand Catullus’ version, we must first understand Callimachus’ original, by investigating the nature of hair oil, both plain and expensive. It is instructive to look at the passage from Callimachus *Hymn* 5 (*On the Bath of Pallas*) 13–30, in which oil for anointing Athena is requested. In this passage, the Achaean

1. C. J. Fordyce, *Catullus* (Oxford, 1961), p. 339.

2. R. Pfeiffer, *Callimachus*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1949), p. 121.

3. B. Axelson, “Das Haaröl der Berenike bei Catull,” in *Studi in onore di Luigi Castiglioni*, vol. 1 (Florence, 1960), p. 19.

4. Axelson, “Haaröl,” p. 19.

5. W. Clausen, “Catullus and Callimachus,” *HSPH* 74 (1970): 86–88.

women are instructed twice to bring no myrrh and no perfume jars—because Athena does not like *χρίματα μεικτά* (16). Don't bring a mirror, either, because Athena (unlike Aphrodite) never uses one. She uses *λιτά χρίματα*, as the athletes do, so bring her *μῶνον ἔλαιον* (29), just plain olive oil. The point is the contrast between the two kinds of oils, *μεικτά* and *λιτά*, perfumed and plain. Perfumed oils (of which *μύρα* are the most expensive) are *μεικτά*, mixed with perfume; plain oils are *λιτά*, plain because they have no perfume in them. The same contrast is intended in the *Coma*; girls do not use plain *perfume*, they use plain *oil*, that is, unperfumed, in contrast to the perfumed oil of married women.

Why? And why is Athena so averse to perfume? Herein lies the key to our problem. It is because perfume is used to make oneself sexually attractive; perfumed oil has specific association with lovemaking, and for that reason is wrong for Athena, a virgin goddess.<sup>6</sup> Note how the idea of perfume leads naturally in the *Hymn* to the idea of looking into a mirror, another implement which women traditionally use in making themselves attractive; fine for Aphrodite, but not Athena, even under the most pressing circumstances.

The association of perfume with sex is only intimated in the *Hymn*, but we can find it spelled out as plainly as we please in comedy. Take for example Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 938–49, from the scene in which Myrrhine is ostensibly preparing to go to bed with her desperate husband, Kinesias. In this scene, one of the items which Myrrhine finds indispensable for sex is myrrh; she even goes to fetch two different kinds. When Kinesias suggests doing without it, Myrrhine replies simply *ληρεῖς ἔχῶν*, “You must be kidding!” (945). In *Ecclesiazousae* 520–26, when Praxagora's husband, Blepyros, is questioning her about her activities of the previous night, she offers him a foolproof test of whether she has been out visiting a lover or not: he may smell her hair for perfume (*εἰ τῆς κεφαλῆς ὄζω μύρου*, 524). Thereupon Blepyros asks indignantly *τί δ'; οὐχὶ βινεῖται γυνὴ κἄνευ μύρου*; to which Praxagora replies *οὐ δῆτα, τάλαν, ἔγωγε* (525–26). Sex without myrrh is out of the question for her as well as Myrrhine.

Myrrh is often included in lists of things associated with sex; at *Acharnians* 1091, among the things said to be ready for Dikaiopolis at the banquet are garlands, myrrh, and prostitutes. In *Clouds* 49–52, Strepsiades complains of the sophisticated sexual habits of his fancy wife, saying that when they went to bed, he would smell of the farm, but she would smell of myrrh, the first item in an amatory list of seven things.<sup>7</sup>

Now that we know the use of perfumed oil, the meaning of the contrast in the *Coma* becomes quite clear. Before she was married, Berenice wore the unperfumed oil appropriate to a virgin; now, as a married woman, she uses perfumed oil. The epithet *γυναικεῖον* does not limit the myrrh, as the commentators suppose (women's myrrh as opposed to girls' myrrh); it is pleonastic (all myrrh is wom-

6. For a discussion of the erotic function of perfume in Greece, see M. Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis* (New Jersey, 1977), pp. 61–63. A. W. Bulloch, *Callimachus: The Fifth Hymn* (Cambridge, 1985), has not quite hit the significance with his note to line 16, “Scented oils were usually considered effeminate by Greeks.”

7. For an instance outside of comedy, see Xen. *Symp.* 2.3, where Socrates comments upon the erotic use of perfume (*μύρον*) by men, saying that they do not use it for the sake of other men (with the implication that they do use it for the sake of women).

anly, or wifely). Catullus, who understood the meaning quite well, has thus rendered “womanly myrrh” as *omnia unguenta*. We shall see from Roman comedy that *unguenta* in Latin had the same connotation as *μύρα* in Greek: perfumed oil used for sexual attraction.

It is not clear from the lexical definitions of *unguentum* as “ointment” or “unguent” that *unguenta* in Latin are generally understood to be scented. For the smell, see for example Terence *Adelphoe* 117–18, where the indulgent father Micio is speaking on his son’s behalf: “opsonat, potat, olet unguenta: de meo; amat: dabitur a me argentum dum erit commodum.”

*Unguenta* have a scent; they are also a typical element in lists of amatory-banqueting items. We find such a list including *unguenta* in Plautus *Pseudolus* 947–48, where Pseudolus is offering Simo a good time: “lepido uictu, uino, unguentis, et inter pocula pulpamentis; / ibidem una aderit mulier lepida, tibi sauia super sauia quae det.”<sup>8</sup> A visit to a prostitute customarily involves *unguenta*. In *Truculentus* 738, the jealous Stratophanes asks the prostitute Phronesium what business she has with Strabax (who has given her money in advance), and Phronesium replies that she owes him three things: “unguenta, noctem, sauium.” In *Moscellaria* 272–309, the prostitute Philematium is preparing to receive a lover; her maid Scapha flatters her by telling her that she does not need the usual adornments (makeup, etc.), prompting the question from Philematium *etiamne unguentis unguendam censes?* The maid then goes on to describe how unpleasant old wives smell who put on *unguenta* to attract their husbands. As soon as the lover comes in and reclines with her (309), Philematium inquires *vin unguenta?* to which the lover replies *quid opust? cum stacta accubo*. That is, she is already as stimulating as myrrh, and he requires no *unguenta*.

Because of their use in lovemaking, *unguenta* are appropriate gifts for lovers. In *Asinaria* 803–5 (the jealous lover Diabolus’ comic contract with his mistress), the parasite makes the following proviso: “Tum si coronas, sarta, unguenta iusserit ancillam ferre Veneri aut Cupidini, tuos seruos seruet, Venerine eas det an uiro.” If the mistress offers *unguenta* to Venus, that is acceptable because she may be doing it on account of Diabolus, but if she sends them to a man, then it is clear she has taken another lover. Catullus himself provides a famous example of *unguenta* used as a lover’s gift in poem 13.11–12: “nam unguentum dabo, quod meae puellae / donarunt Veneres Cupidinesque.”

In *Casina* there is a scene in which *unguenta* on the hair is taken as a sure sign of intended sexual infidelity—the same principle as in *Ecclesiazousae* above. The wife detects the smell on her husband and immediately becomes suspicious: “unde hic amabo unguenta olent?” (236). The husband panics at being discovered: “ut te bonu’ Mercurius perdat, myropola, quia haec mihi dedisti” (238). His wife then accuses him of being a disgraceful *senex amator*: “senectan aetate unguenta-tus per vias, ignave, incedis?” (240).

By now two points should be clear: that *unguenta* meant perfumed oil, and that it was associated with sexual activity. *Unguenta* corresponds exactly to the Greek

8. For the smell of *unguenta* causing desire, cf. the scene in Plaut. *Curc.* (100–103) in which the bibulous *leaena* smells the wine which has been poured on her doorway and addresses it as if it were a type of *unguentum*.

μύρα (or χρήματα μεικτά), and carries the same suggestion of use for sexual attraction. Thus in Catullus' rendering of Callimachus nothing has been lost. Catullus retains the contrast, as he rightly understood it, between the girl's unperfumed oil and the married woman's perfumed oil; *unguenta* by itself (as μύρα by itself) contains the essential idea, and Catullus was free in fashioning the lines to dispense with the epithet γυναικείων without spoiling the thought.<sup>9</sup>

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9. *Omnibus* is chosen, as Clausen explains ("Catullus and Callimachus," p. 87), because it is "idiomatic, or natural," with *expers*; we may also note that the expression *omnium unguentum* occurs in Plaut. *Curc.* 101. I am grateful to Prof. Wendell Clausen and Prof. Robert Renehan for their helpful suggestions.