

between war and food, any sound-minded person would, like Trygaeus, choose the feast that is Aristophanic comedy.¹⁵

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CATULLUS 59: RUFIA AMONG THE GRAVES

Though it may at first seem unworthy of extensive comment—indeed Quinn held it up as a sign of just how pointless Catullus could be—poem 59 deserves a closer look.¹ The brevity and relentlessness of the text, as well as its apparently artless obscenity, have rendered it nearly impervious to interpretation. Even though it consists of seemingly pointless vulgarities, this brief poem contains, in fact, a sophisticated

1. Quinn 1959, 32–34, especially 33: "We have not to guess the precise intent of poems like this one to see the level of poetry they represent. Sometimes it will be the private working-off of fury, sometimes this shared

mechanism for manipulating Catullus' readers and their sympathies by luring them into a pornographic and self-congratulatory voyeurism that becomes an attack on the audience itself. I will argue that this surprise attack on the reader is the primary goal of Catullus 59, and that this attack serves to link this poem with other, more obviously important, themes and poems within the Catullan corpus. Mapping out the rhetorical strategy of poem 59 will demonstrate that the text is not—as Quinn and others have suggested—a poem that the author himself hoped readers would overlook. Indeed, poem 59 will emerge as an important witness to Catullus' views of his audience, its role, and its preoccupations.

It has long been noted, rightly, that the poem reads like the graffiti found on the walls at Pompeii and elsewhere, but this knowledge has not led to an interpretation, perhaps because the graffito-like tone and structure of the text do not by themselves give us a complete picture.² In addition, scholars have not gone far enough in identifying exactly what sort of graffito poem 59 is intended to recall; much hinges on this identification, to which we shall return after a few further preliminaries.³

Nor will we know much more about the poem itself if we can pin the characters in the text to historical personages of note. To be sure, such knowledge may have added to the humor for the original audience but it is, for us, largely of historical interest.⁴ The key here lies within poem 59 itself:

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

The first question to be confronted is textual: the manuscripts transmit line 1 variously but always with the unmetrical *Rufum*. While I accept Avanti's emendation *Rufulum*, following most editors, it will perhaps prove useful to review the resulting

with a few friends, sometimes some more public form of ridicule. . . ." Quinn sums up (33): "... in these poems Catullus' poetic intent was at its lowest level." Finally (34): "But to suppose Catullus intended them to be taken as poetry, on anything approaching the level of the best known Lesbia poems, is surely absurd."

More recently, see Hubbard 1983, 220: "Proponents of C. 1–116 as a Catullan arrangement have also failed to address the problem of C. 52–60, which, while not without moments of inspiration, on the whole form a rather embarrassing grab-bag of doggerel and fragments at the end of the polymetric section. One can well understand a posthumous editor's motivation to preserve these poems out of a desire for completeness, but it is difficult to suppose that a poet concerned with artistic arrangement would conclude the polymetra with such undistinguished efforts. Indeed, it is difficult to suppose that Catullus would deem them worthy of preservation at all."

2. The following discussions of poem 59 have been most helpful: Syndikus 1984, 285–87; Stoessl 1977, 12–13; Granarolo 1967, 243–45; and Martin 1992, 136–38. All try either to explain the vocabulary and prosopography of the poem or to classify it as an example of a certain Catullan type (Veronese poem, anti-Lesbia poem, etc.). None attempts to understand the poem on its own terms by unpacking its language and rhetoric. The commentaries by Doering, Baehrens, and Ellis are the most convenient discussions of earlier views of the poem. All quotations have been taken from Mynors' 1958 text.

3. For a discussion of obscenity in graffiti, see Richlin 1992, 81–86.

4. On these names, and the possibilities behind them, see Neudling 1955, 156–57; and Ellis 1889, 162–63. The prosopographical questions have been taken up by every commentary and have never been satisfactorily answered. I agree with Ellis (163) that "there is no real evidence to show that M. Caelius Rufus has anything to do with the poem." Baehrens 1876, 287–88 is worth reading as well, although he sometimes argues on the basis of questionable premises, for example, the (to his mind certain) Catullan arrangement of polymetric poems.

line from a purely literary standpoint. We are now left with the collocation *Rufa Rufulum*.⁵ This jingle, formed by juxtaposing a noun with a variant on same, is typically Catullan, and we may not object to it on grounds of style. Furthermore, this collocation *Rufa Rufulum* raises questions of genealogy—under what circumstances might there be a woman and a man whose names are a simple and a diminutive form respectively? I would suggest that only a pair of siblings fits the bill. It is true that *Rufus* is not a nomen, and thus *Rufa* is not a name usually given to a daughter in traditional Roman nomenclature, but neither author nor audience need be troubled over this: the reader need only pick up the suggestion that *Rufa* and *Rufulus* are siblings, and this suggestion arises purely from the similarity of the names.⁶ Furthermore, the very fact that these are cognomina and not nomina may itself encourage the audience to see them as a pair of pseudonyms.

We must also consider the suggestion that for *Rufa Rufulum* we should read *rufa rufulum*. As a common adjective, *rufus* means “red-haired,” and so *Rufa*, now understood as a *redender Name*, is simply “the redhead.” The diminutive *rufulus* too exists as a common noun, denoting a certain class of military tribune. I would argue that we need not dismiss either the possibility that the two names are suggestive epithets or that they are meant to be taken as proper names.⁷ All speaking names exploit this double identity, and indeed, the Romans were particularly fond of descriptive personal names, such as Brutus, Caesar, and Calvus, in addition to Rufus itself. Furthermore, *Rufulum* works quite well as a pun: *Rufa* (the redhead) and her little Rufus (brother, soldier). Catullus is ever ready to exploit the natural slipperiness of language, and to pin these names down too tightly is simply an attempt to thwart him.⁸ In fact, such linguistic slipperiness is characteristic of jokes and riddles, and thus is particularly characteristic of graffiti: in a piece like this one, which mimics a graffito, we should expect the author to use the natural flexibility of language to full advantage.

Catullus tells us several things about this *Rufa*: she is from Bologna (*Bononiensis*), she is married to a man named Menenius (*uxor Meneni*), she performs fellatio on a man with a name oddly similar to her own (*Rufulum fellat*), she frequents graveyards (*saepe . . . in sepulcretis*), she steals bread from pyres (*ex igne prosequens panem*), and she is mistreated by the burner of bodies there (*ab semiraso tunderetur ustore*). The funereal connection is significant, for with it Catullus suggests that *Rufa* is a *bustuarium moecha*, a prostitute of the lowest order, whose patrons find her in cemeteries.⁹

As we have seen, a woman whose name is *Rufa* may well have a brother whom one might call *Rufulus*, and thus Catullus hints at incest, one of his favorite invective

5. On the reading *fallat* for *fellat* and Scaliger's defense of it, see Gaisser 1993, 188–89. On *Rufulum* for *Rufum* see Avantius' *Emendationes* (conveniently in Doering 1822, 2:726); see also Friedrich 1908, 261. Baehrens 1876, 287 incorrectly attributes this correction to Palladius. For the editorial activities of Avantius and Palladius, and the chronological relationship between the two, see Thomson 1997, 47–48.

6. Neudling 1955, 157 recognizes this, citing the example of Lesbios/Lesbia in poem 79.

7. Ellis 1889, 163 recognized that the names may be regarded as proper and as common nouns simultaneously; Munro 1878, 133–34 asserts that we have only epithets and not names. Neudling 1955, 156–57 is also useful.

8. Cf., for example, the well-known double entendre of 49. 7 *optimus omnium patronus*.

9. Cf. Martial 1. 34. 8 and 3. 93. 15; for further ancient references to *bustuarium moechae* see Kroll 1989, 105–6. Thomson 1997, 346 asserts that there is no implication of prostitution since such an implication would “remove the intended horror of *uxor Meneni*.” This objection seems to me groundless.

barbs elsewhere.¹⁰ This Rufulus, we know, is not her husband, and thus our graveyard whore not only commits incest but adultery. To make matters worse, she steals from the dead, and is caught and punished by the man who burns the bodies.¹¹ The verb with which Catullus describes this punishment, *tunderetur*, is itself sexually suggestive, and so our Rufa—lowest of prostitutes, incestuous, adulterous, and impious—also submits to a man who is himself very probably a slave.¹² Baehrens captures the point of this last item: “abigiturque mulier contempta ab homine contempto.”¹³ This catalogue seems, in fact, calculated to implicate Rufa in nearly every possible form of sexual vice.

This is pretty strong stuff, and Catullus has given us plenty to laugh at in our graffito. We can laugh at Rufa, who becomes worse the more we read and the more we think about what we have read.¹⁴ We can laugh also at Menenius, whose wife is certainly not the ideal Roman woman, and at Rufulus, redheaded soldier, customer of the worst sort of whore (who happens to be his sister) in a graveyard.¹⁵ We might even laugh at the *ustor*, who belongs, as we are sure we do not, in this sordid world. These are the targets most scholars have identified for Catullus’ wrath, forgetting that there is one other party involved here.¹⁶ Surprisingly, no one has yet asked why Catullus’ audience is expected to have spent much time in cemeteries: we are told that we know Rufa’s behavior is frequent because we have often seen it (*saepe . . . vidistis*).¹⁷ Obviously we can only have observed Rufa among the tombs often if we have been there often ourselves. As the poet would have it in this poem, cemeteries are where one goes to find *bustuariae moechae*. Thus by situating his audience as viewers of graffiti in a graveyard, and as voyeurs of sexual and other violations of that place, he brands the readers as habitués of prostitutes of the lowest order.

Like many of the graffiti of Pompeii, this one simultaneously attacks and titillates its audience: the type in particular which concerns us is not that commonly cited by Catullus’ commentators—for example *CIL* 4. 2421: *Rufa ita vale, quare bene felas*—so much as one of the form *pedicatur qui legit*.¹⁸ Anyone who stops to read such a graffito finds that the target, whose humiliation he has paused to savor, is himself. Rufa, damned with every vice imaginable, turns out to be only an index of the reader’s own proclivities. The whore in our pornographic graffito turns out to be

10. In particular in the Gellius poems, poems 74, 88, 89, 90, and 91.

11. Kroll 1989, 105 summarizes the evidence for this particular crime. Plautus calls one who steals food from the dead a *bustirapa* (*Pseud.* 361).

12. For the social status of the *ustor* and the significance of *semirasus* see Kroll 1989, 106. On the sexual possibilities of *tundo*, its derivatives and compounds, see Adams 1982, 148. Recently, Thomson 1997, 346 has claimed that *tunderetur* has no sexual implications.

13. Baehrens 1876, 289.

14. Quinn 1972, 237 certainly does not see past Rufa as the poet’s target: “[A]s for Rufa, she is treated with the detached contempt appropriate to this vignette from the seamy side of life.”

15. It is worth noting that at least one other time, Catullus situates offensive behavior in a funereal context. This instance is the brilliant, but urine-enhanced, smile of Egnatius at 39. 4–6: “si ad pii rogum fili / lugetur, orba cum flet unicum mater, / renidet ille.”

16. As all commentators have seen poem 59 as an attack against some real person (whether or not identifiable now), I omit references to specific discussions here.

17. On Vulpius’ suggestion that poem 59 is a pasquinade designed to be posted in a public place to humiliate Rufus see Ellis 1889, 162. Baehrens 1876, 289 sees the phrase *saepe quam . . . uidistis* as evidence in support of Vulpius’ position.

18. On graffiti of this type—especially *CIL* 4. 2360 and 4008—see Adams 1982, 124–25. *CIL* 4. 2360: “pedicatur qui leget . . . patius est qui praeterit . . . ursi me comedant, et ego uerpa qui lego.” *CIL* 4. 4008: “pedic[a]t[u]r qui leg[et].”

one we know only too well; we share her with her brother and a slave, in an unclean place.

At this point, it is worth reviewing how Catullus has structured his verbal game. He has drawn us in with a graffito of virulent obscenity, enticing us with a portrait that grows worse the longer we stare at it. He has left us hints of real people—that they may have been well known only adds to the joke—in the proper names. But the very device that informs us that Rufa habitually acted as she did puts us, as readers of both Catullus' text and the graffito it conjures up, squarely in the middle of the picture. For to have seen Rufa ply her trade among the tombstones often, we must have been there often, and we would have been there often only as customers or perhaps as *ustores*. As we laugh at this comedy of social outcasts we slowly realize that we belong not in the audience, but on stage. The simple process of reading a graffito—an innocent attempt, as it were, to relieve boredom and curiosity—has destabilized our role as readers. The spectator has become the spectacle; the smug, superior audience has been revealed to be one of the players too—perhaps, because of its initial blindness, the most laughable of all.

This trick of luring the audience into a self-important attitude, only then to deflate, or even reverse it is not unique to poem 59. One might distinguish something similar in poems 16 and 22. In poem 16, for example, Catullus makes the rather obvious point that the readers of lascivious verses may well be lascivious men themselves, since such poems ought to inspire a lascivious delight.¹⁹ Since the text violently attacks named addressees, Furius and Aurelius, it may not dawn on us immediately—but it should eventually—that *we*, as readers of poem 16, are among the readers being attacked. As Selden puts it, "Aurelius and Furius stand for all future readers of Catullus' work who, at the very moment they think that they have gained some descriptive or evaluative control over the poet, discover that they have simply been 'fucked over' by his text."²⁰

Again, in poem 22, Catullus raises the question of appearance and reality to suggest that a certain Suffenus, who writes awful poetry, must be an awful man. We are told that his book *looks* good, but contains incompetent verse that makes Suffenus, described at the outset as quite charming and sophisticated, seem a talentless hick. We expect the revelation that Suffenus is, in fact, not what he seems; that he, like his book, is seemingly charming but actually base. Catullus surprises us, however, by revealing that the problem is ours, that we are all excellent at seeing flaws in others, but cannot detect our own. The expected barb does not come, and our belief that we could see it coming has been used against us. If the graffito model, *pedicatur qui legit*, reveals that the reader must cede his moral authority, since he too participates in Rufa's immoral world, then the link with poems 16 and 22 reveals that he must also cede his intellectual superiority since it turns out that he has not correctly guessed the nature of this game. His confidence in his ability to read a few lascivious verses is tested, if not destroyed.

In poems 16 and 22 Catullus operates by raising and then thwarting certain expectations in his readers; he does so too in poem 59, though in a way far more subtle and

19. My understanding of poem 16 and the relation that it posits between audience and text is indebted to two recent discussions: Fitzgerald 1995, 34–86, esp. 49–51; and Selden 1992, esp. 476–89.

20. Selden 1992, 488.

to some extent potentially more troubling. Graffiti provide such a good model for this exercise precisely because they often obscure questions of authorship. A graffito of the type imitated by poem 59 pretends to be the virtually authorless display of a third person victim, couched in terms of a second person address, but having no discernible interested first person speaker. Poem 59 is a window into a sordid world, but a window at which the reader stands safely and respectably alone—until he experiences the full effect of the poem and realizes that he has passed beyond the window, that he has become part of the view. The poet has reasserted his presence since the reader must now be aware that someone else has recognized (though preemptively) his prurience as well as his smug sense of superiority. The reader, not the author, has revealed himself in this text.²¹

Poem 59, then, is closer to the heart of Catullan poetry than Quinn and other commentators want to admit. It pretends to be not merely nugatory but so nugatory that it is of no account. It invites us to watch, and therefore to participate in, the vilification of a woman, pornographically displayed for our amusement, only to reveal that we are a central part of the spectacle. Our collusion with Catullus, our ability to appreciate his attack on Rufa, turns out to be effective because of our intimate knowledge of women like Rufa herself, because of our own experience in *sepulcretis*. In poem 59 Catullus reminds us that the reader, like the audience envisioned by poem 16, has mainly come to read his poems at all in the same way a passerby stops to read a graffito—out of an innate prurient interest. Although it has struck so many as without purpose, or as having only a purpose buried in the distant past, an expression of the poet's momentary pique, poem 59 should in fact play an important role in our reading of Catullus: it reminds us that Catullus posits readers like Furius and Aurelius, who read his lascivious verses *because* they are lascivious, and that Catullus, in contrast to so many of his influential later readers, expects us to read with attention even those poems that we may like to claim are beneath our notice.²²

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21. Later Martial will make the epigrammatic author's prior awareness of his audience' predilections an explicit theme of his work in poems such as 3. 68 and 3. 86.

22. I would like to thank J. S. Clay, M. B. Skinner, and the anonymous referees for *CP* for their useful suggestions.

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