

COMMENTS ON CATULLUS 116

It has recently been argued by C. W. MacLeod that Catullus 116 not only has a poetic meaning, but also has a significant position in the Catullan *corpus*.¹ MacLeod in fact views this poem as a programmatic piece, whose position at the end of the Catullan corpus is purposeful and part of the poet's own design. Since poem 116 has been one of the most neglected of the Catullan epigrams, MacLeod's suggestions are very welcome and serve to reopen the questions surrounding this poem.

The interpretation of poem 116 is complicated by its reference in line 2 to *carmina . . . Battiadae*. Most critics quite correctly picture Catullus sending translations of Callimachus to Gellius, but MacLeod feels that 'what Catullus is supposed to have been trying to write is not made completely clear'.² While agreeing that *carmina . . . Battiadae* could mean translations, MacLeod argues that the phrase could just as well refer to poems 'in the manner of Callimachus'.³ Unfortunately, MacLeod does not go on to discuss these alternatives, but is content to state that 'in either case Catullus has been trying to produce Callimachean poems'.⁴

That *carmina . . . Battiadae* refers to *translations* of Callimachean poems, and not to poems *à la Callimaque*, is attested by Catullus' use of exactly the same phrase in line 16 of poem 65 ('haec expressa tibi carmina Battiadae'), a poem which is immediately followed by a translation of Callimachus' *Lock of Berenice*. Had Catullus meant to say 'poems in the manner of Callimachus' in epigram 116, surely he would have employed a different expression.

Moreover, there is evidence in poem 116 itself that *translations* are meant. The initial line, with its 'studioso animo venante requirens', presents the poet diligently 'hunting about' for *carmina*. While the image of a hunt is quite appropriate if Catullus is trying to *select* Callimachean poems for translation, it is not so appropriate if Catullus is creating new poems in a Callimachean style.

If the interpretation of poem 116 is open for debate, its position in the text certainly is not; as MacLeod writes, 'If Catullus' poems as we have them faithfully reproduce their order in the original roll or rolls, and if that order reflects a design of the poet's, then the last piece in our manuscripts naturally merits close attention.'⁵ It is MacLeod's belief that poem 116 is 'an inverted dedication'⁶ which presents a fitting conclusion to the 'book' of Catullus.

As Wheeler pointed out many years ago,⁷ the Catullan corpus as we now have it would have been too long for a single book in one roll. Wheeler consequently suggested that the poems of Catullus originally circulated in several rolls, with the elegies perhaps forming a separate book.⁸ Poem 116, on this hypothesis, would be the concluding piece of such a book, and, fittingly enough, ends on the theme of poetry itself.

But if this hypothesis has any merit, we must be able to identify the *first* poem in our tentative Book of Elegies (or 'Poems in the Elegiac Metre', to be

¹ C. W. MacLeod, 'Catullus 116', *CQ* 23 (1973), 304--9.

² MacLeod, p.305.

³ MacLeod, p.305.

⁴ MacLeod, p.305.

⁵ MacLeod, p.304.

⁶ MacLeod, p.308.

⁷ A. L. Wheeler, *Catullus and the Traditions of Ancient Poetry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1934) pp.9--25.

⁸ Wheeler, p.24.

more precise). Poem 69, the first epigram, will not do: it has no appropriate programmatic nature at all. Poem 65, however, the first piece in the corpus to employ the elegiac metre, will serve our purpose well.

The programmatic nature of poem 65 has not eluded recent critics. Wiseman, for example, sees the poem's line 12 ('semper maesta tua carmina morte canam') as 'the only passage in our collection of Catullus' poems with an apparently explicit programmatic content'.¹ He interprets *carmina maesta* as a reference to the fact that the following poems are all in the elegiac metre that is traditionally associated with poems of mourning.

In a similar manner, Quinn also notes the programmatic quality of poem 65.² First of all, there is the address and dedication to Hortalus: 'it is Hortalus who now receives the presentation copy, rather as Cornelius Nepos . . . is made the recipient of a very special copy of the *libellus* upon publication (Poem 1)'.³ Then, referring to line 12, Quinn agrees with Wiseman and notes that in the elegiac pieces 'the gaiety of 1–60 is conspicuously absent and . . . a new sardonic note preponderates'.⁴ Quinn in fact is even more explicit: 'we should bear in mind that the third volume of the collected edition of the poems began, possibly, with Poem 65'.⁵

What these critics have not called attention to, however, is the thematic connection that exists between poems 65 and 116 which supports this hypothesis. While poem 7 in the polymetrics makes a reference to Battus ('et Batti veteris sacrum sepulcrum', line 6), the term *Battiadae* appears only *twice* in the entire Catullan corpus: first at poem 65, line 16, and then at poem 116, line 2. The reference in each poem to *carmina Battiadae* (i.e. poems of Callimachus) serves to mark the two possibly as the beginning and concluding pieces of a single book of Catullan elegiacs. Seeing that Callimachus, his poetic model, himself wrote a book of epigrams, Catullus might well find it appropriate to refer to that Alexandrian poet in his first and last 'elegiacs'.

Poem 116, thus, is potentially more significant, and interesting, than most critics realize. It is hoped that MacLeod's analysis, and this brief addendum to it, will encourage fresh looks in its direction.

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¹ T. P. Wiseman, *Catullan Questions* (Leicester, 1969), p.17.

³ Quinn, p.264.

² K. Quinn, *Catullus: An Interpretation*

⁴ Quinn, p.265.

(London, 1972), pp.264–5.

⁵ Quinn, p.265.