

XIII.—The "Riddle" of Catullus 67

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The piling up of successive commentaries on this poem has made it appear to be more complex and obscure than is possible in a *diffamatio*, which depended for its effect on instant comprehension. A re-examination of the poem reveals the simple story behind it, and shows how this story is in complete harmony with all the details mentioned by the poet.

It sometimes happens that a work of classical antiquity has had its meaning obscured by the sheer bulk of the scholarly efforts that have been expended upon it. This has been the fate of Catullus' *ianua*-poem. It has long been regarded as a "riddle," and many an editor and student has set his hand to the solution of it. Their collective efforts may be found in several articles and in almost any modern commentary on Catullus.¹ These men have all built one on the work of the other and their solutions, as a result, are now so complex and confusing that the poem has become a riddle in very truth: to understand it, in the light of the comment upon it, is a real challenge.

Yet it should be clear that these solutions cannot be right. The poem, by its very nature, has to have a simple solution.² It is a *diffamatio*, a lampoon; its purpose is to defame and ridicule. Passing from hand to hand, circulating through the *convivia*, it was to be read and digested at a glance, for only so would it cause laughter, and only if it caused laughter, would it achieve its intended aim. People do not laugh at a poem which needs a commentary to be understood; yet if the poem means what modern scholarship has tried to make it mean, Catullus' own contemporaries would have needed the services of some earlier-day Kroll or Ellis to enable them to see its point.

¹ E.g. R. Cahen, *RPh* 26 (1902) 164-180; W. Kroll, *Philologus* 63 (1904) 139-147; H. Magnus, *Philologus* 66 (1907) 296-312; G. Perotta, *Athenaeum* N.S. 5-6 (1927-28) 160-190.

² Perotta admits this (*op. cit.*, 161), as does Magnus (*op. cit.*, 296), but their solutions are as confusing and complex as the others.

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. The only "riddle" in the poem is the identity of the unnamed "Man with Red Hair" who figures in the concluding lines (43-48), but this is a riddle only to us of a latter day. We may be certain that Catullus' contemporaries knew at once who the red-haired man was.

The story is this: in the town (it was either Verona or Brixia) there were two men, father and son, to whom Catullus gives the name "Balbus," who once lived in the house now occupied by another person, whom Catullus calls "Caecilius." Balbus senior lived there first; when he died, his married son, Balbus junior, moved in. Balbus junior's wife was no virgin when he married her: she had been previously involved with two men — in fact, with the Balbuses themselves. The son failed in his attempt on her virtue, for he was impotent; his father had been more successful. After the father's death, and after the son had moved, with his wife, into his father's house, the wife continued her immoral activities. She committed adultery with two men, Postumius and Cornelius; these escapades were notorious. In addition, she carried on a better-concealed affair with the nameless "man with red hair," which the poem concludes by revealing.

Provided that one does not let his attention be distracted by details, 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*.

The task that remains is to show how the text does indeed tell precisely this story, and to resolve the difficulties of the poem. This will be best accomplished by a step-by-step analysis. The poem is a dialogue between the door of Balbus' (now Caecilius') house and an interlocutor, who may be Catullus himself or someone else (it scarcely matters which). It opens by the interlocutor's addressing the door:

O dulci iocunda viro, iocunda parenti,
 salve, teque bona Iuppiter auctet ope,
 ianua, quam Balbo dicunt servisse benigne
 olim cum sedes ipse senex tenuit,
 quamque ferunt rursus <nato> servisse <maligne>
 postquam es porrecto facta marita sene
 dic agedum nobis quare mutata feraris
 in dominum veterem deseruisse fidem (1-8).

This introductory passage serves two purposes: first, it identifies the two main characters in the story as a father and his son; second, it gives a hint of the story to come. The first distich is a formal greeting to the door, apparently quite general and harmless in character: the interlocutor addresses the door as *iocunda viro*, *iocunda parenti* ("beloved by husband, beloved by father"), because the Roman house-door is traditionally the guardian of the home, and is naturally, therefore, regarded with respect and affection by every good *paterfamilias*.³ The sardonic overtones of the greeting are revealed only after the whole poem has been read, when we have learned that however *iocunda* the door may have been to *this* father, *this* husband had somewhat less reason to think so well of it.

In the second distich we are introduced to Balbus senior, and informed that while the old man himself lived there, the door served him well, i.e. the elder Balbus permitted no tinkering with his wife's affections, and saw to it that the door was always safely locked against *nocturni adulteri*.⁴ The fact that he kept so close watch on his own wife makes his crime against his son, when it is subsequently revealed by the poet, all the more infamous.

The third distich introduces a textual problem. The MSS reading is *voto . . . maligno*, which can scarcely be allowed to stand, because, even if meaning can be made of it,⁵ it is obscure and

³ So Perotta, *op. cit.*, 166.

⁴ I can see no reason for not thinking that *ipse senex* (4) refers to *Balbo* (3). To make *Balbo* refer to the son, as Perotta does, introduces an obscurity into the story at once — but in a *diffamatio*, while there may be innuendo, there must not be any obscurity.

⁵ Ellis (*ad loc.*) accepts Pleitner's explanation, which admittedly makes some sense after it has been explained, but at best requires more time and ratiocination for its comprehension than the rapid pace of the *diffamatio* will allow. It must be recalled that the difficulty of understanding *voto . . . maligno* arises from the fact that it is strange Latin, and not from its being a topical or local reference which Catullus' con-

would not command the immediate comprehension which is indispensable in a *diffamatio*. The generally accepted *nato . . . maligne*, on the contrary, not only makes excellent sense but is immediately clear and like the preceding distich accurately forecasts the story that is to come. With this reading, we are introduced to Balbus junior, and are told that, unlike his father, he did not succeed in keeping adulterers away from his wife. We learn, further, of the elder Balbus' death, and of the fact that after his death, his son and his wife took over the house. The phrase *facta marita*, applied to the door, is clear enough. It means that Balbus senior, during the last years of his life, was a widower, and that the coming of Balbus junior gave the house a mistress once more. There is nothing obscure or difficult about this; if anything, it helps to identify more precisely the particular family who figure in the tale.

The final introductory distich is a request to the door to make its confession: why has it abandoned the loyalty it had shown toward its older master?⁶ Why was it faithful to Balbus senior and faithless toward his son? In other words, it is, in oblique terms, a request to the door to give a true account of the scandalous rumors which are circulating about Balbus junior's wife.

The next section of the poem (9-18) presents no difficulties at all, except for the hopelessly garbled line, vs. 12, which no one has yet succeeded in emending in any satisfactory way.⁷ The first distich of the passage tells us that the particular Balbus family with whom the story is concerned no longer occupy the house where these scandalous events took place, but have transferred it to another person, here called "Caecilius." The rest of the passage consists of a disclaimer of responsibility on the part of the door (9-14), a request from the interlocutor for more definite proof of the door's innocence (15-16), and a "shrug of the shoulders" from the door: "why bother to tell the tale or to defend myself? Nobody is really interested" (17). The interlocutor then concludes by proclaiming his interest, and urging the door to tell its story (18). The purpose of this section of the poem is to provide suspense, to

temporaries might have understood readily enough. If the latter were the case, we should not be justified in emending it.

⁶ Kroll (*ad loc.*) correctly notes that *veterem* modifies *dominum*, not *fidem*.

⁷ *verum istius populi ianua quile facit*, MSS. For the various attempts at emendation, see the edd.

tantalize the reader by suggesting that the tale hinted at in the introduction is not going to be told, after all. The door's hesitation to speak, too, suggests that the tale may be too scandalous to bear repetition. With this passage, Catullus makes certain that no one who has read his poem thus far will put it down until he has read to the end.

In interpreting the remainder of the poem, only one thing needs to be kept in mind. Although Catullus is primarily interested in relating scandalous gossip, the door's formal purpose in telling the story is to prove its own innocence, to show, in effect, that against that kind of character there could be no defense. The door proceeds actually to tell two stories, one dealing with the wife's behavior before her marriage, the other with her behavior after it. Both are intended to show that the woman was hopelessly immoral, and that no door, however well intentioned, could have protected her virtue, since she had none. The first story is contained in vs. 19-28:

primum igitur, virgo quod fertur tradita nobis,
falsumst. non illam vir prior attigerat,
languidior tenera cui pendens sicula beta
numquam se mediam sustulit ad tunicam;
sed pater illius gnati violasse cubile
dicitur et miseram conscelerasse domum,
sive quod impia mens caeco flagrabat amore,
seu quod iners sterili semine natus erat,
et quaerendus funde foret nervosius illud,
quod posset zonam solvere virgineam.

We learn, first of all, that Balbus' wife was no virgin when he married her.⁸ This raises at once, in the mind of the reader, a

⁸ *tradita nobis* can mean either 1) that Balbus was only recently married when he moved into his father's house, or 2) that he moved in before he was married, and married the woman shortly thereafter. Both these explanations assume that *nobis* refers specifically to the door; neither contradicts vs. 6, *postquam es porrecto facta marito sene*, which asserts only that the house received a mistress sometime after Balbus senior's death. A better explanation makes *nobis* more general, meaning "us, the household, the Balbus family": "the girl was no virgin when she came to us," i.e. when she married Balbus junior, whenever that event took place. The relative date of the marriage is of no significance at all and has no bearing on the story. Whether the girl married Balbus junior before or after his father's death, or before or after he moved into his father's house, makes no difference whatever, and to debate this point merely obscures the tale. We may be certain that none of Catullus' contemporaries gave the question a moment's thought.

question: "Who was responsible for that?" The door replies, to the unspoken query, "No, it wasn't her (present) husband, as you may be guessing. He was involved, but he wasn't the first. There were *two* men, and of the two, someone other than Balbus junior was the first." This, I believe, is the only reasonable explanation of *prior*: *non illam vir prior attigerat* means "her (present) husband had not been the first (of two) to touch her." The word *prior* tells the reader that *two* men were involved premaritally with the girl, for *prior* means specifically, "the first of *two*." This naturally makes the reader wonder who the other man, the real culprit, was.⁹

But before we learn that, the door retails another bit of gossip. The reason why Balbus was not the first was not lack of opportunity but the fact that he was impotent (21-22). And now we learn the identity of the second, and more successful, paramour: it was Balbus senior (23-28). Here is scandal indeed! The girl had no moral scruples about coming to marriage in a pure state. Balbus junior was equally complacent, but he proved to be impotent. Balbus senior was even less affected by troublesome moral standards, and had the virility which his son lacked; it was he who "loosed the virgin's knot." He "violated his son's bed," i.e. usurped his son's rightful place,¹⁰ and "besmirched that wretched house."¹¹

We can scarcely wonder, after hearing this tale, that the interlocutor, forgetting for the moment the girl's part in the escapade, exclaims at the shameless conduct of the older man:

egregium narras mira pietate parentem,
qui ipse sui gnati minxerit in gremium (29-30).

Nevertheless, the door's main purpose in telling it is to show up the real character of Balbus junior's wife. Before she was married, she had already shown herself morally irresponsible. She offered

⁹ To make *vir prior* mean "her former husband," as so many editors (e.g. Kroll) have done, makes the story hopelessly complicated, and leads us into a veritable welter of husbands and marriages, which leaves the reader thoroughly discouraged. The fact that Balbus was not the girl's husband at the time of these premarital relations is of no significance; he *is* her husband *now*, and by what other term would the door speak of him?

¹⁰ The fact that it was not his "rightful" place at the moment is of no consequence. The bed (*cubile*) is spoken of, like *vir*, above, as of the present circumstances.

¹¹ The "house" (*domus*) is either the *family* (i.e. the Balbus household) or again is used as of the present circumstances, to mean the "house" of Balbus junior and his wife, which certainly was besmirched by Balbus senior's act, even though that act took place before the "house" was established.

her favors to her intended husband, and then, when he failed to respond, accepted the attentions of her father-in-law-to-be, a particularly revolting moral lapse because of its implications of incest.¹²

The door now proceeds to relate what happened after the marriage. Balbus' wife first committed adultery with two men, Cornelius and Postumius:

atqui non solum hoc se dixit cognitum habere
 Brixia Cycneae supposita speculae,
 flavos quam molli percurrit flumine Mella,
 Brixia, Veronae mater amata meae,
 sed de Postumio et Corneli narrat amore,
 cum quibus illa malum fecit adulterium (31-36).

The mention of Brixia at this point has caused some trouble to the commentators, who experience difficulty in fitting it into the complex explanations which they have made of Catullus' story. But the difficulties arise from the explanations rather than from the story itself. There can be only two possible reasons why Brixia is mentioned, either (1) because it, and not Verona, is the locale of the whole story, or (2) because, although the Balbus home was located in Verona, the younger Balbus married a girl of Brixia. There are two presumptions in favor of the latter: first, Catullus' home was in Verona, and he presumably knew the gossip of that city better than he did that of Brixia, and second, if the locale of the whole story is Brixia, it seems strange that the poet should have waited so long to say so. If the mention of Brixia has no point other than to tell the reader where the whole affair took place, there would seem to be no good reason for not saying so at the start. It would appear, therefore, that Brixia is mentioned for some other purpose. What could that purpose be, if not further to identify the particular Balbus family of whom Catullus is writing? If this is so, then we can see why Catullus did not mention Brixia before. He has postponed it to this late point to add suspense to his story. Catullus' tale of scandal is much more provocative if the reader is kept in suspense as to who the characters really are. Skillfully Catullus lets out the required information only bit by bit. The

¹² The Roman Law forbade marriage between a man and his (deceased) son's wife; it frowned on, although it did not specifically forbid, marriage between a man and his son's fiancée: Just. *Inst.* 1.10.6.9. The fact that at the time of the relation, the girl was as yet unmarried, and that Balbus senior obviously had no intention of marrying her himself, in no way removes the suggestion of incest.

first hint of the identity of the characters is given in vs. 3-6, where we are told that it concerns a man whom he calls "Balbus," who was a widower, and whose married son occupied his father's house after the latter's death. This seems fairly precise, but may not have been, for the situation is certainly a common one, and as I have already hinted, "Balbus" may well be a pseudonym. The next bit of information comes in vs. 9, where we are informed that the Balbuses in question lived in a house now occupied by "Caecilius" (possibly also a pseudonym). Little by little the information is accumulating: a widower — married son — father died — son occupied his house — later moved out and transferred the house to someone else.

At this point we are left still not absolutely sure who the characters are, and Catullus leaves us in this state of uncertainty while he relates the story of the wife's premarital misdeeds. But now he lets out the fact which finally identifies the Balbuses. They are that particular family which meets the requirements of the information already given out, plus the additional fact that the son married a girl of Brixia. Now Catullus' contemporaries certainly knew who was meant, for whether or not the name was really "Balbus," this total nexus of facts could hardly have fitted more than one family.

Now the bits of the puzzle fall into place. Brixia "knows of this," i.e. of Balbus' wife's premarital delinquency, because the girl lived in Brixia, and it was there that the elder Balbus seduced her. Brixia "knows" of her committing adultery with Cornelius and Postumius because these two individuals were also of that town. While they were in Verona, for one reason or another, they carried on affairs with Balbus' wife, and lacking a proper restraint, told of their adventures when they returned home.

The next passage (37-40) consists of the interlocutor's query as to how the door came to know all this. The door replies that it has heard Balbus' wife speak of these matters in the company of her *ancillae* (41-44). And the door has one final bit to add. The wife's affairs have also included a liaison with the unnamed "man with red hair":

praeterea addebat quendam, quem dicere nolo
nomine, ne tollat rubra supercilia.
longus homost, magnas quoi lites intulit olim
falsum mendaci ventre puerperium (45-48).

Whatever *ne tollat rubra supercilia* may imply,¹³ the real reason why the poet does not name the man is because it is more amusing to identify him by indirection. His identity cannot have been in doubt for a second.

There is nothing in the poem, I believe, which will contradict the explanation I have here offered for it. Its story is a simple one; it has to be simple, because the nature and purpose of the *diffamatio* will not permit it to be anything else. Catullus has told the story well, maintaining the reader's interest by a skillful admixture of fact, innuendo, and suspense, never telling so much that he spoils the tale or withholding so much that he makes it obscure. The poem is no riddle. It has been made to appear one because commentators have insisted first on a precise interpretation of every word and phrase in the poem, and then, out of the mass of detail produced by this kind of analysis, have attempted to reconstruct its story. As each subsequent commentator has added new bits of fact and proposed new bits of interpretation, the poem's story has been effectually buried under the commentary. By putting aside the commentaries and starting once more with the story, we find that the details all fall easily into place, and the poem emerges what Catullus meant it to be: a scurrilous and very effective lampoon.

¹³ See the commentators, *ad loc.*