

## THE RIDDLE OF CATULLUS 49: SOME NOTES ON ITS INTERPRETATION<sup>1</sup>

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‘Disertissime Romuli nepotum,  
quot sunt quotque fuere, Marce Tulli,  
quotque post aliis erunt in annis,  
gratias tibi maximas Catullus  
agit pessimus omnium poeta,  
tanto pessimus omnium poeta,  
quanto tu optimus omnium patronus.’

Gilbert Highet calls this poem ‘a strange little poem’<sup>2</sup>, and with good reason indeed. Its meaning, to be sure, is so enigmatic that to any interpreter it certainly proves to be one of the most perplexing poems in the entire Catullan corpus. Its startling effect on a modern reader is aptly summarised by Gordon Williams: ‘A reader is left with the uncomfortable feeling of talking with someone much cleverer and more sophisticated than himself . . .’<sup>3</sup> It is, therefore, small wonder that after so many years of Catullan scholarship interpreters and commentators are still in two minds about the interpretation of the poem. Interpretations of its meaning are in fact just as divergent as speculations on its occasion are manifold.

Basically the interpreter of the poem is confronted with two problems. Firstly, what occasion — if c. 49 is indeed to be connected with a specific occasion — did give rise to its composition? Secondly, is the poem to be taken at face value as a laudation of Cicero, or must we also read overtones into it? In other words, did Catullus intend it to be a sincere expression of thanks, or was the poem meant to be ironical, as some scholars have taken it, and if this be the case, why and to what extent?

On the first question scholars have speculated much though without any positive results. Hypotheses on the motive of the poem are, therefore, numerous. A brief survey of some of these theories will at least indicate how wild and fruitless they are. Schwabe, for example, takes it as an acknowledgement of Cicero’s defence of Caelius Rufus and his exposure of Clodia in 56 B.C.<sup>4</sup>, a theory which was elaborated by Baehrens, who suggests that Catullus was grateful because his name had been kept out of the proceedings.<sup>5</sup> Schwabe’s view was refuted ninety years ago by Sellar<sup>6</sup>, and more recently by Fordyce, who considers it ‘poor psychology to suppose that Catullus would have gone out of his way to thank Cicero for defending his rival or that . . . he would have thanked an advocate for vilifying her (i.e. Clodia) professionally’.<sup>7</sup>

Westphal, again, thinks the occasion was in 62 B.C. when Catullus had been introduced to Clodia’s circle by Cicero<sup>8</sup>, while Ellis, ascribing Catullus’ gratitude to an unknown lawsuit in which Cicero defended him, holds the view that the

poem may be connected with the two speeches delivered by Cicero shortly after his return from exile in 57 B.C.<sup>9</sup> Kroll takes c. 49 as Catullus' acknowledgement of a copy of one of Cicero's speeches, perhaps the *In Vatinius* of 56 B.C.<sup>10</sup> The amusing suggestion has even been made that Catullus thanked Cicero because the latter had made his house available for the clandestine meetings of the poet and Clodia.<sup>11</sup> Finally, there is the hypothesis of Thomson that Cicero on occasion wrote a poem which he sent to Catullus for his criticism, and that c. 49 was the poet's reply to this request.<sup>12</sup>

It is evident that all similar hypotheses are mere guess-work. Since we know nothing whatever of the relations between Cicero and Catullus, the occasion of this poem probably will always remain a mystery to a modern reader.<sup>13</sup> And so we turn to our second and much more important problem, viz. the interpretation of the poem. Now, on this issue scholars are generally divided into two groups. Some have taken the poem at its face value as a laudation of Cicero. Thus Ellis, for example, remarks: 'The poem is really, as its words convey, eulogistic . . .'<sup>14</sup> Others, again, have read irony into it, an interpretation which first recommended itself only in the 19th century. As far as we know, it was first postulated in 1850 by one Clumper of Amsterdam — 'homo insigniter perversus'<sup>15</sup>, as Baehrens describes him. Clumper's view, however, very soon gained ground, particularly through Otto Jahn's influential editions of Cicero's *Orator* and the fact that the ironical interpretation coincided with the contempt which Mommsen and his school of historians had for Cicero the man. Early in the 20th century it also reached Italy, where it found but few supporters.<sup>16</sup>

Amongst the German supporters of this interpretation B. Schmidt holds an important place. In his opinion c. 49 was not meant to be a compliment at all; rather is it bitterly sarcastic. Catullus, thus Schmidt argues, could only have referred to himself as 'pessimus omnium poeta' (5—6) in an ironical sense. If this is the case, then the reference to Cicero as an advocate ('tanto . . . quanto', 6—7) must be meant to be equally ironical. In that case 'omnium' in the final line (7) should be taken with 'patronus', not with 'optimus'. The phrase 'omnium patronus' is in fact a sarcastic comment on Cicero's readiness to be the advocate of all and sundry. More specifically the poem has a bearing on Cicero's defence of Vatinius in 54 B.C., whom he had prosecuted two years earlier. But why this ironical expression of thanks? Schmidt assumes that Cicero on occasion had expressed an unflattering opinion of Catullus' poetry. Catullus, in turn, takes revenge by professing to agree with him and to be grateful for Cicero's criticism: 'gratias tibi maximas Catullus/agit' (4—5). In other words, he repays the famous statesman by heaping ironical coals on his head.<sup>17</sup>

With English scholars of the previous century the ironical interpretation found very little support. Refuting it outright, Ellis, for example, exclaims: 'Neither Petrarch in the 14th century, nor Balzac in the 17th, nor Lessing in the 18th, detected any irony in the poem.'<sup>18</sup> A more moderate view, however, is held by Sellar. Though he rejects Schmidt's hypothesis, he nevertheless

concludes that if there is irony in c. 49, it is 'an irony of modest self-depreciation'.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, some scholars of our own age are rather cautious to opt for either outright rejection or support of the ironical interpretation. Typical of this non-committal attitude is the view of Havelock, in whose opinion the poem illustrates the 'deprecating humour' with which Catullus looked both at himself and other people, an opinion which more recently won the support of Fordyce.<sup>20</sup> Kroll considers the tone of the poem as only slightly exaggerated<sup>21</sup>, while Thomson argues for an interpretation 'between the extremes of ironic and sincere', for 'a slight and friendly irony', which Cicero would take to heart and which no reader would overlook.<sup>22</sup> Quinn appears to favour the ironical interpretation, though he does not commit himself either.<sup>23</sup> Others, for example Bardon, have no doubt whatsoever that the ironical interpretation should be upheld.<sup>24</sup>

The question is however whether this interpretation is in fact borne out by c. 49 itself. Naturally this can only be established by a word-by-word analysis of the poem. The poem clearly starts on a high-sounding and exaggerated note. The superlative 'disertissime' (1) immediately sets the tone for the first three verses, which, indeed, sound like high praise.<sup>25</sup> Being a key-word, 'disertissime' requires a closer examination. Some scholars assume that 'disertus' is here synonymous with 'eloquens'. Thus Ellis, followed by Quinn, translates 'disertissime' with 'most eloquent', stating that Cicero uses 'disertus' as practically synonymous with 'eloquens'.<sup>26</sup> Thomson, upholding this view, observes that supporters of the ironical interpretation have made too much of 'disertissime'. Quoting numerous examples of this use of 'disertus' and 'eloquens' by Cicero, he concludes: 'Hardly . . . was it in Catullus' mind to disparage Cicero as an orator by its use.'<sup>27</sup>

Now, it appears that these scholars have taken 'disertus' here too readily as synonymous with 'eloquens'. For, even if Cicero on occasion does so use 'disertus', it does not follow that Catullus uses it as such in his poem. It is just possible that 'disertus' here has another shade of meaning, which, in fact, it can have. Moreover, Cicero himself apparently draws a clear distinction between 'disertus' and 'eloquens' when in his *De Oratore* he makes Antonius declare: 'Itaque ego . . . scripsi . . . disertos me cognosse nonnullos, eloquentem adhuc neminem: quod eum statuebam disertum, qui posset satis acute atque dilucide apud mediocres homines ex communi quadam opinione dicere: eloquentem vero, qui mirabilius et magnificentius augere posset atque ornare, quae vellet . . .'<sup>28</sup> And Quintilian, outlining the theory of style, *elocutionis ratio*, confirms this distinction.<sup>29</sup>

Both Cicero and Quintilian, therefore, considered the 'disertus' to be endowed with gifts of a lower order than those of the 'eloquens'. The 'disertus' is one whom we would style an accomplished speaker; the 'eloquens' a true orator. The former expresses himself clearly, sharply and articulately; the latter speaks ornately ('ornare'; 'ornate') and in an elevated style.<sup>30</sup> But it should also be noted that 'disertus' when applied to talented speakers, not

metrical  
considered

only suggests the ability to use 'fine or flowing words' but that it also may have the meaning of 'glib' or 'smooth-tongued'.<sup>31</sup> In this sense Cicero appears to use it of both Clodia's circle and of a speaker, in the latter case in an ironical context.<sup>32</sup> Now, I certainly do not want to press the meaning of 'disertus' in c. 49 too much; yet, it is most tempting to take it here in the sense of 'glib' or 'smooth-tongued'. If this perhaps is the case, it surely cannot be synonymous with 'eloquens', and then 'disertissime' may already be an indication that Catullus had no intention of praising Cicero as an orator in this poem.

The further phrasing of the poem seems to substantiate this presumption. 'Romuli nepotum' (1) indeed sounds solemn and heroic.<sup>33</sup> However, scholars are agreed that in its exaggerated form this is clearly mock-solemnity,<sup>34</sup> an idea which is further stressed by the excessive tripartite formulation of 'all times' ('quot sunt . . . annis', 2—3), a formula used by Plautus with mock-solemn extravagance, also by Cicero, and elsewhere twice by Catullus, in both cases in an ironical context.<sup>35</sup>

The address, 'Marce Tulli' (2), is formal, solemn, and official,<sup>36</sup> and resembles the form of address used in the Senate, official documents, and on solemn occasions. Commentators draw attention to the fact that Cicero similarly uses it in the solemn words to himself put into the mouth of the country.<sup>37</sup> Next follows the poem's purpose which, though positive, is equally formal and impersonal, and put in the form of a 'wide hyperbaton': 'gratias tibi maximas Catullus/agit' (4—5).<sup>38</sup> The apparent formal reference to himself in the third person singular and the prominent placing of his name — like that of Cicero at the end of a line — are significant. Both Catullus and Cicero are, therefore, equally formally mentioned and prominently placed, a fact which, as Onetti rightly observes,<sup>39</sup> commentators have overlooked. Just as striking is the fact that both the beginning and the middle of the poem are accentuated by high-sounding superlatives: 'disertissime' — 'maximas'. The question immediately arises whether such an exaggerated expression of thanks has indeed the ring of sincerity.

Another superlative ('pessimus', 5) follows the expression of thanks, bringing an unmistakable change of tone. It not only forms a sharp contrast with the high-sounding superlatives 'disertissime' and 'maximas', but also a strong bathos after what precedes.<sup>40</sup> The rather exaggerated 'humility', implied by 'pessimus', hardly sounds sincere. In fact, Catullus refers to himself in terms which he uses elsewhere to disparage poets who, like Cicero, he it noted, were supporters of the old poetic school and therefore completely out of touch with the new poetry,<sup>41</sup> advocated by Catullus and his circle.

The contrast, suggested by 'disertissime' (1) and 'pessimus', is more sharply defined in the two final lines (6—7). Not only do these verses form a perfect balance but they are also constructed with mathematical exactness to form a seeming comparison: 'tanto pessimus omnium poeta/quanto tu optimus omnium patronus.' The obvious implication of this comparison is that Catullus is so much inferior to other poets as Cicero is superior to other

'patroni'.<sup>42</sup> But it is highly improbable that this is the entire message that these lines are to convey. Just as little are the phrases 'optimus omnium patronus' and 'pessimus omnium poeta' in repeated form merely rhetorical and directed at emphasis. Catullus' exaggerated humility unmistakably suggests that his assessment of Cicero as an orator is equally exaggerated.<sup>43</sup> Obviously 'pessimus omnium' sounds modest, but in its exaggerated form it becomes mock-modesty. The implication is that 'optimus omnium' is mock-praise.<sup>44</sup> The apparent contrast between Cicero's grandeur and Catullus' modesty thus becomes relative. Catullus means to call Cicero 'optimus' just as little as he means to call himself 'pessimus'.<sup>45</sup>

In addition there is the word 'patronus', put just as prominently as 'poeta'—both at the end of a line — to balance it. It may be used here in a slightly unfavourable sense. In fact, Cicero himself apparently does not attribute the highest oratorical distinctions to 'patronus'.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, 'optimus omnium patronus' may contain a double sense: 'best of all advocates' and 'best advocate for all and sundry'.<sup>47</sup> The impression therefore persists that these verses were written with ingenious ambiguity, and this ambiguity to a large extent ensures that c. 49 is yet another Catullan masterpiece<sup>48</sup>, both in content and in form.

As to the latter, note in particular the symmetrical pattern (3—1—3) of the poem's structure. The seven lines form three clear units. Right in the middle stands the core of the poem, consisting of a single line (4) and framed by the two remaining units of three lines each. Each of these units is accentuated by high-sounding superlatives. It should be noted that from a total of 32 words no less than 5 are superlatives: one each for the first ('disertissime') and second ('maximas') units; three ('pessimus'; 'pessimus'; 'optimus') in the final unit. These superlatives not only link the various parts into close unity but also add to the exaggerated tone of the poem.

At first blush, then, the poem appears to be purely eulogistic, particularly as a result of the use of high-sounding superlatives. On closer examination, however, one senses that the sustained exaggeration is suspect, and that the apparent eulogy is all but sincerely meant. In fact, the overall impression is one of consummate ambiguity, which is already implied by the very first word ('disertissime') and brought to a climax at the end. This ambiguity is intensified by the formal address of Cicero ('Marce Tulli'), the equally formal reference to Catullus himself ('Catullus'), sharp contrasts ('disertissime-pessimus'; 'pessimus-optimus'; 'poeta-patronus'), repetition ('pessimus-pessimus'; 'poeta-poeta'), and the use of words which may have an unfavourable connotation ('disertissime'; 'patronus').

From these remarks it is evident that c. 49 operates on two levels. The surface impression is one of high praise; the deeper meaning is veiled in the ambiguous phrasing, which Catullus presumably used deliberately, leaving it to his readers to interpret it in whatever way they fancied. But, being exaggerated, the language of the poem becomes *ironical*. It is, however, no sharp and bitter irony, as Schmidt has argued, but rather a light and mild one.<sup>49</sup>

But, why this ironical tinge? It should be realised that in essence c. 49 deals with poetic criticism<sup>50</sup> — a fact which most commentators have overlooked; this may be implied by the repetition of ‘poeta’ and the contrast between ‘poeta’ and ‘patronus’. Possibly the poem may, therefore, be intended as a defence of Catullus’ poetry against the criticism of one who had no eye for the new poetry. And so Schmidt was probably right when he suggested that Cicero on occasion — no matter when — privately or in public had expressed an unfavourable opinion of Catullus’ poetry. It is well-known that Cicero, an ardent admirer of Ennius, was out of sympathy with the poetry written by the *poetae novi*. In fact, on two occasions he refers to them in rather disparaging terms.<sup>51</sup> Now, it is true that both these references were made some time after Catullus’ death, an argument put forward by Fordyce in support of his view that the ironical interpretation has not yet been proven.<sup>52</sup> However, this does not deny the possibility that Cicero may have expressed his negative views on Catullus’ poetry prior to the latter’s death.<sup>53</sup>

If this assumption should prove acceptable, I presume that Catullus’ reaction to Cicero’s criticism took the form of some advice, the essence of which more or less boils down to this: *cobbler, stick to your last!* But, instead of openly lampooning a distinguished figure like Cicero, and here it should be borne in mind that both Cicero and Catullus were moving in the same society and had friends in common, he wrote this ‘letter of thanks’ with its mild and slightly ironical tone. Such advice coming from a poet like Catullus a sensible man like Cicero would certainly take to heart.

A final observation: Whatever Catullus’ intention might have been in writing this poem, Cicero obviously could not have felt at ease when he read it. Williams pithily observes: ‘It is hard to believe that Cicero felt — or would have been justified in feeling — a glow of satisfaction as he read it.’<sup>54</sup>

#### NOTES

1. I wish to thank my colleague, Mrs. B. T. Millar, who criticised the first draft of this article.
2. *Poets in a landscape*, Hammonds Worth, 1959, 50.
3. *Tradition and originality in Roman poetry*, Oxford, 1968, 40.
4. L. Schwabe, *Quaestiones Catullianae* = *G. Valeri Catulli liber*, Giessen, 1862, 126f. Highet, 50, and Kenneth Quinn, *Catullus: the poems*, London, 1970, 235, apparently support this view, though both express themselves very cautiously.
5. A. Baehrens, *Catulli Veronensis liber*, vol. II, Lipsiae, 1885, 253.
6. W. Y. Sellar, *The Roman poets of the Republic*<sup>3</sup>, Oxford, 1889, 432. Note in particular his observation that “the words of the poem hardly justify this inference”.
7. C. J. Fordyce, *Catullus: a commentary*<sup>2</sup>, Oxford, 1965, 213.
8. R. Westphal, *Catull's Gedichte in ihrem geschichtlichen Zusammenhange, übersetzt und erläutert*<sup>2</sup>, Breslau, 1870, 241.
9. R. Ellis, *A commentary on Catullus*<sup>2</sup>, Oxford, 1889, 170. See now also A. G. McKay and D. M. Shepherd, *Roman lyric poetry: Catullus and Horace*, London, 1969, 227.
10. W. Kroll, *C. Valerius Catullus*<sup>3</sup>, Stuttgart, 1968, 89.
11. Thus McKay and Shepherd, 227, observe: “. . . It is also amusing to conjecture that Catullus may be thanking Cicero for the use of his house to accommodate the clandestine meetings of Catullus and Lesbia.”
12. D. F. S. Thomson, “Catullus and Cicero: poetry and the criticism of poetry”. *CW* 60, 6, 1967, 227.

13. See Fordyce, 214; cf. Thomson's, 225, remark: "the occasion . . . necessarily eludes the reader of today"; also Sira Onetti, "The technique of counterbalancing in Catullus", *Acta Classica* XIX, 1976, 64, who, referring to E. Laughton's lengthy article on this matter (*CPh* 55, 1970, 1ff.), dismisses this problem as "that unfortunate search for occasions".

14. See *op. cit.*, 170; also E. T. Merrill, *Catullus*<sup>2</sup>, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1951, 82; cf. Fordyce's, 214, remark: "The poem may be meant to be taken at face value, as a genuine expression of admiration and gratitude."

15. *Op. cit.*, 251.

16. Cf. Thomson, 225. For a list of the most important supporters of this interpretation see Ellis, 169f.

17. His views are expounded in the *Prolegomena*, XXXIX, to his *C. Valeri Catulli Veronensis carmina*, Leipzig, 1887, and in *Rh. Mus.* LXIX, 273. For criticism of his hypothesis see Sellar, 432f.; Fordyce, 214; and cf. Kroll, 89.

18. *Op. cit.*, 170.

19. *Op. cit.*, 433f.

20. E. A. Havelock, *The lyric genius of Catullus*, Oxford, 1939, 110; see Fordyce, 214.

21. Kroll, 88, remarks: "Der Ton ist . . . zu hoch gegriffen, der Ausdruck des Lobes wie die Bescheidenheit etwas übertrieben . . ."

22. *Op. cit.*, 225.

23. *Op. cit.*, 233f.

24. H. Bardon, "Propositions sur Catulle", *Collection Latomus* 118, Bruxelles, 1970, 67. Cf. W. Eisenhut, *Catull. Lateinisch-Deutsch*<sup>5</sup>, München, 1960, 201; M. Lenchantin de Gubernatis, *Il libro di Catullo*, Torino, 1962, 89; J. Granarolo, *L'oeuvre de Catulle. Collection d'études anciennes*, Paris, 1967, 258; F. Stoessl, *C. Valerius Catullus. Mensch, Leben, Dichtung, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie*, Meisenheim am Glan, 1977, 136.

25. Cf. Onetti, 64.

26. *Op. cit.*, 170. Cf. Quinn's, 234, remark on "disertus": "the obvious epithet to apply to Cicero." See also Merrill, 82.

27. *Op. cit.*, 226.

28. *De Or.* I, 21, 94; cf. *Or.* V, 18, and Sandys, 20, ad loc.: ". . . in the present passage *disertus* is an appropriate epithet for . . . an accomplished speaker, as contrasted with an eloquent orator."

29. *Inst. Or.* VIII *Prooem.* 13. Cf. I, 10, 8.

30. For the basic differences between the "disertus" and the "eloquens" see Fordyce, 131, on Catullus 12, 8f.

31. See Ellis, 46, on Catullus 12, 9; cf. Fordyce, 131.

32. Cf. *Cael.* 28, 67; also 7, 15, and R. G. Austin, 64, ad loc.: "Here it (i.e. *disertus*) is pleasantly ironical."

33. Fordyce, 214: "a solemn quasi-heroic phrase"; Kroll, 89: "ein . . . etwas zu feierlicher Ausdruck." Cf. McKay and Shepherd, 227.

34. E.g. Ellis, 170; Fordyce, 214; Quinn, 234. Cf. D. O. Ross, *Style and tradition in Catullus*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1969, 99 n 231; Onetti, 64. Commentators quote c.58,5 "magnanimi Remi nepotes", used in an ironical context.

35. Cf. *Pers.* 777; *Fam.* XI, 21, 1; Catullus 21, 2-3 and 24, 2-3; and see Fordyce, 215; Quinn, 234; McKay and Shepherd, 227.

36. Cf. Fordyce, 215; Quinn, 234 ("formal"); Kroll, 89 ("feierliche Anrede"); McKay and Shepherd, 227: ". . . the formal address appropriate to the Senate . . . and official documents".

37. Both Fordyce, 215, and Quinn, 234, quote *Cat.* I, 27: "si omnis res publica sic loquatur, 'Marce Tulli, quid agis?'"

38. Cf. Quinn, 234: "a formal, positive, impersonal statement"; Onetti, 64: "a wide hyperbaton".

39. Onetti, *loc. cit.*, note 38.

40. Cf. Onetti, 64.

41. E.g. Volusius (36,6), Caesius, Aquinus and Suffenus (14,23). See Ellis, 171; De Gubernatis, 89; Quinn, 234; Onetti, 64; Stoessl, 136.

42. Cf. Quinn, 234.

43. Cf. Ellis, 171: "a humility so exaggerated as hardly to escape some suspicion of insincerity"; also Quinn, 235.

44. Fordyce, 214, rejects this inference. Cf. Merrill, 83: "the self-depreciation heightens the praise of v. 7."

45. Fordyce's, 214, rendering of Schmidt's view.
46. Ellis, 171, quotes *Brut.* XCVII, 332: "nec enim decet te ornatum uberimis artibus numerari in vulgo patronorum." But see Thomson, 227, who objects to this inference.
47. Cf. Fordyce, 214.
48. See Ellis, 171; Quinn, 235; Onetti, 65.
49. Thomson, 227, calls it a "slight and friendly irony". Cf. Onetti, 65.
50. In my opinion, Thomson's central thought that c. 49 basically deals with *poetical criticism*, is well-taken. However, I disagree with him that Cicero had sent Catullus a poem for the latter's criticism. But see now also Stoessl, 136. Referring to the poem as "eine poetisch gestaltete Anrede an Cicero", he observes: "Das Gedicht ist durch Sprache und Ausdrucksweise aufs engste mit c. 36 verbunden."
51. The references are at *Disp. Tusc.* III, 45 ("cantores Euphorionis") and *Att.* VII, 2, 1 ("neōteroi"). Cf. also *Or.* XLVII, 161 ("poetae novi"). For some illuminating remarks on them see A. L. Wheeler, *Catullus and the traditions of ancient poetry*<sup>2</sup>, Berkeley, 1964, 78ff.; K. Quinn, *The Catullan revolution*, Melbourne, 1959, 44ff.
52. *Gp. cit.*, 214; cf. Kroll, 89. But see also U. Knoche, "Erlebnis und dichterischer Ausdruck in der lateinischen Poesie", in *Catull. Wege der Forschung CCCVIII*, hrsg. von R. Heine, Darmstadt, 1975, 143.
53. Cf. G. Friedrich, *Catulli Veronensis liber*, Leipzig-Berlin, 1908, 229f.
54. *Gp. cit.*, 40.

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