
"Some thoughts of a Friend": Catul. 35, 5-6

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«Some thoughts of a friend»: Catul. 35, 5-6

Until recently, Carmen 35 of Catullus used to be read with little enthusiasm by scholars. The text seemed to refer to «a poet Caecilius», who had been working on «a poem on Cybele» and who was now invited by Catullus to hasten to Verona and hear «some considerations of a common friend of yours and mine». The invitation as such and the tribute of Catullus to his fellow poet remained rather elusive, particularly because we do not possess a single line of Caecilius' output. So c. 35 had come to be regarded as merely a testimony of yet another unknown poet, in this case one of the Neoterici.

In a thought-provoking contribution in this journal, Giuseppe Gilberto Biondi made a fresh attempt to revive interest in the poem¹. The crucial expression in the poem, *incohatam / Dindymi dominam*, is taken by most scholars as a learned expression for «a poem he (Caecilius) had started to compose about Cybele». The mythological reference to the mountain-range of Dindymus (above Pessinus in Phrygia) no doubt refers to the *Magna Mater* or Cybele, the goddess who is also central in Catullus' own c. 63². However, a radically different interpretation is also possible, as Biondi shows. Taking up some suggestions made in earlier scholarly literature³ he argues that the link with Catullus' c. 63 is more than mere coincidence: the words may actually be taken as referring to that poem: 'the poem I had started to make about Cybele'.

Following this line of thought, Biondi suggests that Caecilius was not a real poet at all, but a friend or acquaintance of Catullus. Somehow Caecilius obtained part of Catullus' poem, perhaps still in a first draft, and feigning its authorship he used it to seduce his girl. She then fell in love with him, but in such a consuming and passionate way that it might be considered as a punishment for Caecilius⁴.

1. Giuseppe Gilberto Biondi, *Il carme 35 di Catullo*, «MD» 41, 1998, pp. 35-69.

2. Further discussion on the exact sense of *incohatam* and other details is provided by Biondi.

3. Biondi, p. 35 and pp. 40-41 refers to Giovanni Pascoli (in a study of 1895) and to two articles by R. Heine (1975) and J. Basto (1982).

4. Biondi, p. 62 n. 18 even discerns some threatening notes of castration, but this is far from certain. There may well be some hint in 35, 12 with its *impotente amore*, and there is the corresponding adjective *tener* for both Attis (63, 88) and

In the eyes of the poet, this would be a suitable revenge for Caecilius' imposture, and accordingly he pays great compliments to the girl: not only is she very learned (in appreciating what is a masterpiece by Catullus) but by her consuming passion she also unknowingly takes revenge for Catullus.

This theory seems very attractive indeed. Not only does it solve many of the problems in the traditional interpretation of c. 35, such as the haste Catullus is asking for⁵, (5) but it also makes much more sense of the poem. It is no longer an occasional poem that largely escapes our intelligence, but it becomes a highly intricate little game about literature, accessible to every keen reader.

Further Thoughts

In support of this new hypothesis, I would like to add one or two further considerations which Biondi seems to have overlooked.

Generally speaking, the joke of Catullus' exposing Caecilius as a forger would be very much in line with the Catullus as we know him from the rest of his short poems. For Catullus is constantly referring to his own poems, starting from c. 1⁶. For example, in the first sixty poems we find certain references in 6, 17; 16, 3-13; 36, 5-7; 40, 2; 42; 50 and 54, 6-7⁷.

In addition, among the most interesting of Catullus' invective poems are some pieces that, just as c. 35, seem to be performing a form of punishment of friends on the level of language. Thus Alfenus and Cornificius are 'criticised' in poems recalling their betrayal and lack of support (c. 30 and 38), while Ravidus is being threatened with harsh iambics (c. 40). A particularly strong example of Catullus' awareness of the power of his verse is c. 42, where a *moecha* is being insulted by Catullus' menacing *hendecasyllabi*. In combination with a motif of *furtum*, similar threats occur in c. 12, where Marrucinus Asinius is scolded for stealing dinner napkins and warned that he can expect «three hundred *hendecasyllabi*» if he does not

Caecilius (35, 1). However, it is difficult to see a reference to castration in an expression like *manusque collo / ambas inciens*.

5. Biondi, p. 42-4 lists no less than fourteen 'open questions'. These are almost completely answered by his hypothesis.

6. I leave aside the discussion on the composition of Catullus' book of verse. Whether or not the present order is due to Catullus himself or some compiler is not relevant here.

7. Allusions to his own poetry have been suspected in many places, e.g. 27, 2 *calices amariores*.

return them. Biondi's hypothesis about c. 35 may find some support in all of such parallels within the Catullean *libellus*.

One interesting point, meanwhile, remains to be discussed. In Biondi's notes on individual words and expressions of c. 35, some lines are devoted to the intriguing question of the identity of the *amici sui meique*. Biondi rightly rejects the customary interpretation that the words refer to Catullus himself. Surely, indeed, a third person seems to be meant. So is he «a common friend» who told Catullus about Caecilius' fraud? This is possible but remains fairly unconvincing. In particular: why would Caecilius need to hasten to Verona to hear *quasdam cogitationes* of this friend? What would he have to add to Catullus' words? And why would the heavy word *cogitationes* be used here? To call it ironical is not a sufficient explanation.

If Caecilius has misused some lines of Catullus c. 63, not finished by then, the poet's joke can be carried one step further. The common friend may be not any living person, but the literary character of Attis, the subject of Catullus' poem, and hence a name of great interest to Caecilius as well. «A friend of yours and mine» seems a fitting, ironical way to refer to this Attis.

If we read the text of c.63, we see Attis delivering two speeches. In lines 12-26, having castrated himself, Attis still revels in his deed and exhorts his fellow followers of Cybele. These lines can be relevant for c. 35. We do not know whether Catullus composed his poem from beginning to end, but it is at least possible that Caecilius used these lines from the beginning of c.63 to make a lasting impression upon his girl.

The second speech is even more to the point. For at the end of c. 63, Attis has lost his initial fury and returns to his senses. Recalling his deeds (63, 45 *sua facta recoluit*) he then strongly resents his course of action and feels extremely sorry. In a great display of *pathos*, he laments the loss of his native country which he has to leave, like fugitive slaves flee their masters (63, 51-2 *dominos ut erifugae / famuli*). Warm memories of his past happiness lead up to laments about his loss of virility and his lonely future life far from the city. The regret is summed up in his final line: *iam iam dolet quod egi, iam iamque paenitet* (63, 73).

In view of their length and weight, these words spoken by Attis might well be the *cogitationes amici sui meique* of 35, 5-6. For one thing, they can most suitably be called *cogitationes*. And their message would be exactly what Catullus probably wished to be made clear to his cheating friend: «whoever ventures to touch upon 'the Magna Mater' (whether as a goddess or as a poem) is bound to regret it in the end!». By implication, the words would give Caecilius a last chance: he may still be saved from further wrongdoing (and hence of its awful consequences) if he hears how matters ended for Attis.

This definitely adds sense to the motif of haste (35, 7 *uiam uorabit*)⁸.

In this way the joke would be much stronger and satisfying to Catullus. Not only has Caecilius made bad use of some of the first lines of c. 63, but he is outdone by the poet himself with the sequel of the very text in question. In a superb display of literary skill, Catullus pokes fun at his friend and teasingly outwits him.

Biondi briefly noticed that in his hypothesis, c. 35 does not so much refer to extra-linguistical events, as it is an event in language, requiring the active participation of the reader⁹. If my additional suggestion is correct, this participation is even essential to understand Catullus' joke. The links between 35, 13-4 *incohata* / *Dindymi dominam* and 63, 13 *Dindymenae dominae* and 63, 91 *dea domina Dindymi* are almost too obvious to be missed. But they also provide a key to the reader searching for further textual clues. The linear or 'first time reader' would probably miss the point, but a 'second reader', rereading and restudying the poems, might see what Catullus means.

The «friend of yours and mine» is none but Attis. And his message is not to be missed by Caecilius. The cheater is taught a lesson not just by the poet, but also by the poem. Its tone is ironical and playful throughout, as is so characteristic of Catullus in his relations with others. Therefore, we need not assume that his friendship with Caecilius was damaged in any way by the publication of c. 35. Their bond may even have been strengthened.

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8. In addition, the curious expression *viam vorare* introduces a Homeric note. It contains an echo of 'heroes biting the dust'; cf. Hom. *Il.* 2, 418; further 11, 749 and *Od.* 22, 269. The effect here is, of course, not lofty but comic.

9. Biondi, p. 67.