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nescio quid febriculosi scorti

A NOTE ON CATULLUS 6

Catullus 6 is a short poem addressed to a certain Flavius, otherwise unknown.¹ Flavius, so we are told, refuses to say anything about his girlfriend, and the poet can explain this only by assuming that he has taken up with a mistress who is singularly unrefined (lines 1–5). It is certainly clear that Flavius is not spending his nights alone; the state of his bedroom proves that much (lines 6–11). But, says Catullus, there is no reason for Flavius to remain silent, no matter what folly he is engaging in. He should confide in the poet, whose only wish is to praise him and his mistress in witty verse (lines 12–17).

Although this is hardly one of Catullus' more memorable poems, only its textual problems—admittedly severe—seem to have attracted much attention. A mere handful of scholars have considered it as literature.² For this the apparent simplicity of the piece may be largely responsible. At first sight, it looks like a straightforward occasional poem on a stock theme: Catullus wishes to find out who Flavius' girlfriend is, Flavius—probably with justifiable suspicion (cf. Ovid, *A.A.* 1.741–2)—refuses to say, and Catullus attempts to provoke a revealing outburst by putting an insulting construction on that silence.³ Nevertheless, it seems seldom to have been realized just how insulting that construction is, when Catullus terms the girl *nescio quid febriculosi scorti* (lines 4–5), or that this insult has a definite structural role to play in our appreciation of the poem's central scene.

Among the modern commentators to whom this description has given pause, one remarked on the rarity of the word *febriculosus*;⁴ one noted the word's polysyllabic nature and declared the expression 'probably vaguely pejorative';⁵ one forthrightly, but none the less implausibly, suggested that the girl was suffering from venereal disease;⁶ one more delicately observed that she must be generally unhealthy;⁷ and two hazarded the guess, almost certainly correct, that she had malaria, but made nothing of this.⁸ Of all the editors of Catullus only

¹ For conjectures see C. L. Neudling, *A Prosopography to Catullus* (1955), pp. 67 f. I wish to thank Professor Carl Rubino for reading and commenting on this paper; he is not, of course, to be held responsible for the views expressed.

² See especially Ilse Schnelle, *Untersuchungen zu Catulls dichterischer Form* (1933), pp. 3 ff.; K. Quinn, *The Catullan Revolution*² (1969), pp. 62 f.; S. V. Tracy, 'Argutatinambulatioque (Catullus 6.11)', *CP* 64 (1969), 234–5.

³ For the *topos* see F. Leo, *Plautinische Forschungen*² (1912), p. 145; F. Jacoby, 'Drei Gedichte des Propertius', *RbM* 69 (1914), 398 ff., esp. 402 ff.; A. L. Wheeler, *Catullus and the Traditions of Ancient Poetry* (1934), p. 227.

⁴ E. T. Merrill, *Catullus* (1893), ad loc. Like many other editors of Catullus, he claims wrongly that this is the first occur-

rence of the word (see below).

⁵ Quinn, *Cat. Rev.* 63 (polysyllabic), and *Catullus: the Poems* (1970), ad loc. (pejorative); cf. Schnelle, op. cit., p. 6.

⁶ A. Riese, *Die Gedichte des Catullus* (1884), ad loc. Whatever is to be made of Celsus 4.28, there is evidence enough to show that syphilis existed in Europe before 1492 (R. C. Holcolm, 'The antiquity of congenital syphilis', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 10 (1941), 148–77; C. Wells, *Bones, Bodies and Disease* (1964), pp. 100–5), even though it is difficult to find specific examples in the ancient world (but see T. F. Carney, 'The Death of Sulla', *Act. Class.* 4 (1961), 64–79). Nevertheless, malaria remains more likely (see below).

⁷ R. Ellis, *A Commentary on Catullus*² (1889), ad loc.

⁸ W. Kroll, *C. Valerius Catullus*² (1929), ad loc.; M. Lenchantin de Gubernatis, *Il*

Baehrens attempted an explanation contributing to our understanding of the poem; he suggested in effect that the epithet serves to typify the girl as a prostitute of the lowest possible social level.¹ This is confirmed by the only known occurrence of *febriculosus* before Catullus' time. Plautus uses the word to describe such common whores:²

non quasi nunc haec sunt hic, limaces, liuidae,
febriculosae, miserae amicae, osseae,
diobolares, schoeniculae, miraculae,
cum extritis talis, cum todillis crusculis.

It seems appropriate now to wonder if the tone of the poem is quite as light and playful as has usually been assumed. Romans generally possessed a cruel sense of humour and enjoyed savage invective directed at others, while Catullus asserts his own taste for wit at the start and the conclusion of his poem (lines 2 and 16). But though Flavius might have found amusement in hearing himself credited with *tam latera ecfututa* (line 13), it is reasonable to ask whether he relished finding his mistress described as the commonest of whores and himself as being in love with her: 'uerum nescio quid febriculosi scorti diligis'.³ On the few occasions on which this question has been asked, it has been observed that Flavius would indeed have taken the description as a joke because, as Jacoby put it, 'ein *scortum febriculosum* würde Catull nicht besingen.'⁴ The answer is interesting, inasmuch as it concedes that Catullus' words are much harsher than is customarily admitted; it is unsatisfactory, because it begs the question. We cannot simply assert that the girl was not a *scortum febriculosum* without proof drawn from the poem itself.⁵ Otherwise, we might just as easily declare that Catullus was never friendly with Flavius (this being the only poem addressed to him), and that the poet set out deliberately to insult the man under the guise of friendship.⁶

To establish whether Flavius would or could have taken the description as a joke, we need to look at the rest of the poem and, most particularly, at the imagined bedroom scene which immediately follows the description of the girl (lines 6–11):

*libro di Catullo*² (1933), ad loc. For fuller argumentation see Marina Passalacqua, 'Plaut. Cist. 406', *RFIC* 98 (1970), 302–3, and for a discussion of malaria in ancient Italy, P. A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower* 225 B.C.–A.D. 14 (1971), pp. 611 ff.

¹ A. Baehrens, *Catulli Veronensis Liber* (1885), ad loc.

² Plautus, *Cist.* 405–8 (cf. *Poen.* 265 ff.); see also Passalacqua, loc. cit., and Ilona Opelt, *Die lateinischen Schimpfwörter und verwandte sprachliche Erscheinungen* (1965), p.107 and n.83.

³ Quinn, *Catullus: the Poems*, ad loc., comments on *scorti diligis* that 'the blunt *scorti* sharpens the oxymoron'. By this he presumably refers to the fact that Catullus elsewhere can use *diligere* to connote more than sexual passion alone. But though this

is true of 76.23 and 81.2, the mode of expression Catullus employs at 72.3–4 shows that this connotation could not be taken for granted.

⁴ Jacoby, op. cit., p.406; cf. G. Friedrich, *Catulli Veronensis Liber* (1908), ad loc.; K. Quinn, *Catullus: an Interpretation* (1972), p.226.

⁵ The same failure to argue the case has bedevilled understanding of Catullus 32: see M. G. Morgan, 'Ipsithilla or Ipsicilla? Catullus, c. 32 again', *Glotta* 52 (1974), 233–6.

⁶ On Roman sensitivity to insult see the very interesting remarks of J. M. Kelly, *Studies in the Civil Judicature of the Roman Republic* (1976), pp.93 ff. Cicero, *pro Cael.* 6 is clearly disingenuous.

nam te non uiduas iacere noctes
 nequiquam tacitum cubile clamat
 sertis ac Syrio fragrans oliuo,
 puluinusque peraeque et hic et ille
 attritus, tremulique quassa lecti
 argutatio inambulatioque.

Since Catullus represents himself as peering round Flavius' bedroom, we are perhaps supposed to take this as a sign of his anxiety about the man and his devotion to him; he is so concerned that he will even go to Flavius' apartment and see that all is well. But if this is so, why should he expect to find Flavius there, or any evidence for Flavius' recent activities? Had the girl been a *scortum febriculosum*, Flavius would not have been at all likely to take her back to his apartment, or to have spent entire nights with her (lines 6–7). Rather, he would have accompanied the girl to her place of business, a room somewhere, a cubicle, or even a back-alley,¹ and their dalliance would also have been of somewhat shorter duration. Given the characterization of the girl, therefore, the *mise-en-scène* is definitely incongruous.

Why, then, this incongruity? Surely, this is to draw the reader's attention to the details of the bedroom scene itself. This is noteworthy not merely for its bold personifications,² nor even for the 'mock gravity of the long technical-sounding words'.³ Though Kroll appears to have been the only commentator to recognize it, Catullus is playing on a series of Hellenistic epigrams here.⁴ In those epigrams the person of the lover is described in terms demonstrating his or her infatuation. So the lover has a sleepless look, hair disordered from a garland recently removed, panting breath, and an unsteady walk. Instead of launching into a description of Flavius along these lines, however, Catullus demonstrates his infatuation by transferring the various traits to the furnishings in his bedroom. So it is the bed which cries out; it is the bed which has recently borne the garlands;⁵ it is the pillows which are quite worn away; and it is the entire contraption which is credited—in one of Catullus' most striking hendecasyllabic lines—with an unsteady gait.⁶ This is truly a new variation on an old theme, and an elegant conceit.⁷

¹ For full discussion see H. Herter, 'Die Soziologie der antiken Prostitution im Lichte des heidnischen und christlichen Schrifttums', *Jb. Ant. Chr.* 3 (1960), 70–111, especially 85 ff. That a back-alley was a possible site for a rendezvous is worth emphasizing, since Quinn interprets Catullus 58.5 on other lines (*Catullus: the Poems*, ad loc.; but see R. J. Penella, *Hermes* 104 (1976), 118–20). Nor were the Romans the only ones to avail themselves of such a site: see F. A. Pottle (ed.), *Boswell's London Journal 1762–1763* (1950), pp.262 and 272 f.; cf. also pp.227, 230 f., 237, 240 f., 255 f., and 280.

² Cf. Schnelle, op. cit., p.4; Quinn, *Cat. Rev.*, p.63.

³ So Quinn, *Catullus: the Poems*, ad loc.

⁴ Kroll, *C. Valerius Catullus*, ad loc. (cf.

Wheeler, loc. cit.), citing *A.P.* 5.175 (Meleager), 12.71 (Callimachus), and 5.87 (Rufinus), to which may be added 12.135 (Asclepiades).

⁵ Line 8 I take as did Baehrens, ad loc.: 'manifesta concubitus facti indicia prae se fert cubile sparsis ubique sertorum reliquiis et efflans adhuc acres odores.'

⁶ On lines 10–11 see Tracy, loc. cit.; on line 9 see H. Fuchs, 'Zu Catulls Gedicht an Flavius (c. 6)', *Mus. Helv.* 25 (1968), 54–6.

⁷ Catullus may have used a similar technique in Poem 17; see N. Rudd, 'Colonia and her Bridge: a note on the Structure of Catullus 17', *TAPA* 90 (1959), 238–42. Here, however, Catullus is unable to maintain the personification; in line 13 Flavius is credited with *tam latera ecfututa*.

In short, *nescio quid febriculosi scorti* is a very strong expression, used deliberately for its shock value: it rivets the reader's attention on the lines which immediately follow. And here a series of effects are created to draw attention to Catullus' wit and sophistication. There is first the incongruity of setting a *scortum febriculosum* in Flavius' bedroom. This leads to puzzlement over the need for the bedroom scene at all. And that in turn produces the realization that Catullus, by a string of bold personifications, has attributed to Flavius' bed the symptoms of infatuation normally attributed to the person of the lover in Hellenistic epigrams. So *nescio quid febriculosi scorti* turns out to be less a statement of fact than a device or mechanism to underline Catullus' highly original way of exploiting a commonplace. Which Flavius could have seen not only as a joke, but also as the fulfilment of Catullus' wish 'te ac tuos amores ad caelum lepido uocare uersu' (lines 16–17).

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