

Eötvös Loránd University
Faculty of Humanities

PHD THESIS
SUMMARY

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CATULLUS AND THE POETICS OF MEDIATION

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In my thesis I am interpreting the poetry of Catullus, taking into account some observations of contemporary literary and cultural studies. Three different problems and texts related to them are presented in three chapters, employing partly different theoretical discourses and methods. On the following pages I summarize the main points and interpretative results of the thesis.

1. The poetry of Catullus – and Lucretius – may also be read through the lens of Augustan poetry. Seen from this perspective, the worlds of Catullan and Lucretian poetry can be interpreted as provocations of Augustan “poetic ideology”, in that they pose a threat to the unity, presence and stability of poetic voice; the reliability of narratives; the unproblematic relationship between the *ego* and the outside world, and in this sense also the unproblematic nature of perception. Allusions to Catullus and Lucretius found in Augustan poetry thus may be interpreted in the context of intertextual subversion and/or domestication.
2. All of the theoretical and interpretative issues raised in the thesis – *urbanitas* as rhetoric and as textual world, the fragmentation effected by the metropolitan experience, the material nature of writing as a factor in the destabilization of poetic utterance – outline a “provocative” Catullan poetics. My interpretation differs from previous readings mainly in that I give special emphasis to the issues of mediation and media, presenting in this context the provocative character of Catullus’ poems.
3. The concept of *urbanitas* (and related words in the “dictionary of *urbanitas*”) served in the discourse of the late republican Roman elite to exhibit a “modern” rhetorical, stylistic and habitual standard in a way so that one can freely employ it – precisely because of the inherently indefinable nature of *urbanitas* – to condemn others as *inurbanus* or even *rusticus*. This is the rhetoric, combining poetic and social dimensions, of the Catullan poems tightly connected to “social performance”.
4. The Catullan poems related to the concept of *urbanitas*, while employing the above outlined rhetoric, become active participants in social exchange processes. The real and at the same time fictive space that in poetic texts is constructed by the poetic texts themselves as they perform symbolic exchanges, can be interpreted together with the rhetoric of *urbanitas* to the extent that *urbanitas* itself – in some respects going beyond contemporary Roman use of the word – can be seen as the Catullan version of “the circulation of social energy”.
5. The interpretation of *carm.* 67 serves to illustrate the “archaeology” of Catullan urbanity *ex negativo*, through the reading of an elegiac poem with markedly provincial contexts. The

gate (*iannua*) becomes here an interface (in sociological sense), locating Catullan poetry at the border between inside and outside, public and private, reality and fiction, a place for the “conversion” of immaterial and material social goods.

6. The interpretation of *carm.* 12, in anthropological context, underlines how tightly the above mentioned rhetorical and cultural dimensions are interwoven in Catullan poetics. Marrucinus Asinius’ “theft” is criticized by employing the ideology of *urbanitas*, but at the same time – destabilizing the position of the speaker – suggests that it is precisely such “transactions” which help social performance going on. In this context Asinius Pollio – offering to redeem his brother’s deed by money, and thus receiving dubious praise – seems to obstruct the dynamic processes which maintain *urbanitas*.
7. The reading of *carm.* 39 focuses on the relationship of *urbanitas* and cultural identity. In this poem socio-cultural criticism is performed using ethnic stereotypes, through the usual self-destructive rhetoric. In my interpretation emphasis is given, in addition to stylistic *inurbanitas*, to the problem of Italian *vs.* Roman and Cicero’s concept of *duae patriae*, in light of which we can understand how in this case the rhetoric of this poem combines the usual ambivalences of *urbanitas* with the ambivalences of cultural identity.
8. Catullan *urbanitas* in most cases is not directly connected to the metropolitan experience. *Carm.* 10 is an exception and thus receives especially detailed treatment in my thesis. In this poem a “poetics of the metropolis” is constructed by suggesting that the poetic text, and even the figure of the poet as *flâneur*, is in fact a collage of “metropolitan intertexts”. This, of course, happens not independently from the mechanisms of *urbanitas* as seen in other poems; these mechanisms set up a “social comedy” in *carm.* 10.
9. *Carm.* 10 recycles, in the first place, typical roles and situations of Roman comedy in order to create a poetics which is based on the “unreadable” trope of irony, whose cultural concretisation is the metropolis itself. I illustrate the comic background through Plautus’ *Menaechmi*. From the perspective of comedy the roles and situations constructed in Catullus’ poem can be interpreted as their own mirror images: “Catullus” is exposed as a comic parasite and/or bragger whom – in contrast to his own narrative – Varus did not bring with himself from the *forum* intentionally. The appearance of *forum* (and *otium*) at the beginning of the poem itself makes ambivalent the semiotic system of the text in that *forum* can be interpreted both as the virtual *forum* of comedy and as the real *Forum Romanum*, thus the virtual “Greek” world of the *palliata* and the late republican Roman social performance are projected onto each other already in the first lines.

10. Horace deals with the “intertextual threat” posed by Catullus’ *carm.* 10 in *Sat.* 1, 9 (*Ibam forte via sacra...*), in which Horace – approaching the Forum through Via Sacra, and producing literary/social meaning from the “textual city” – meets, as it were, the “Catullus” of *carm.* 10 in the figure of the *quidam* who, reshuffling a whole day’s program, comes close to endanger Horace’s private and poetic integrity as well. This integrity cannot be defended even by Aristius Fuscus representing *urbanitas* (*male salsus*; cf. the reproach *insulsa male* in *carm.* 10), precisely as a result of his metropolitan/ironic stance. In my view, Horace exposes himself to the metropolitan/intertextual dangers precisely for the *sermone* *varii*, constitutive in the genre of satire, in order to transform Catullus’ *carm.* 10 into a kind of Horatian satire, retroactively.
11. Detailed discussion of reflections on the medium of writing as medium in literary interpretation is a relatively new development in classical philology, and especially in research on Roman literature. Recently, however (in connection with interpretations, inspired by New Historicism, focusing on the interdependency of literary texts and their cultural contexts), literary texts’ reflection on their own mediality has become a primary interest. Catullus plays an important role in this change as a poet who frequently discusses material aspects of writing, reading, and the book; in his poetry these material aspects are shown as tightly connected to the processes of the construction of literary meaning. This happens already in *carm.* 1 which discusses the aesthetic qualities of Catullus’ (polymetric) poetry in terms of the physical quality of the *libellus*.
12. In *carm.* 14 and 22 the book as gift can be interpreted as a *pharmakon* in its Derridean sense, one which exposes writing as the medium of *différance*. In *carm.* 14, Catullus speaks about the anthology he was given as a gift in the terms already introduced in *carm.* 1, evoking the performative act of presenting/dedicating a new book. This raises the suspicion that the real issue here is not the anthology itself, but the medium of the book in general which, as *pharmakon*, necessarily “adulterates” its own author. The variant readings *salse* and *false* inscribe materially, as it were, this process of textual *différance* into the poem. The same opposition is active in *carm.* 22 where the poet speaks about Suffenus and his supposedly poor poetic book in which appearance (textual urbanity) and reality (textual rusticity) are copied onto each other and thus showing both author and his book to be inseparable “media”. In constructing the poetics of textual *différance* Catullus also makes good use of the metrical rules of elision, whose effect is that written and read/recited text are always already differentiated.

13. I interpret *carm.* 42 – a poem, as it is well known, based on *flagitatio* as a form of popular jurisdiction – as a miniature drama of writing and reading, in which the wax tablet as a medium allowing change and alteration of the text turns Catullus’ poetic utterance into a *texte scriptible* in the Barthesian sense. The *hendecasyllabi* sent to the unnamed woman – as reader – can fulfill their mission only through the act of reading, but it is far from certain that this is going to happen in accordance with the aims of the sender. The poetic rage can thus be read as the consequence of the Platonic frustration at loss of control over the text and its interpretation.
14. Catullus’ epyllion (*carm.* 64) is also interpreted in the context of textual materiality. The labyrinthine narrative – based on delusions of the characters, the narrator and the reader as well – touches at several moments on the issues of writing and text as media. Thetis’ morphological metamorphosis (*Thetidis – Thetis – Thetidi*) presents the goddess as a textual formation made up of letters and thus reconfigurable; Ariadne discovers her own fictionality in connection with her status as a figure represented on a textile cover described in the text of the *ecphrasis*; and finally Aegeus tries – in vain – to “write” Theseus as a rhetorical/textual formation, using the binary code “red/white” as a kind of proto-writing. In my interpretation, *carm.* 64 questions the presence, unity and stability of poetic (narratorial) voice from the perspective of the textual nature of poetry.