

Most modern metrical handbooks assert that the metrical theories of the Greeks and Romans are useless for understanding ancient meter. Yet awareness of one issue in ancient metrical theory involving the nature of the so-called Phalaecian hendecasyllable helps contextualize a clever pun in Catullus 42 and suggests that Catullus may have been more cognizant of contemporary metrical issues than scholars have previously realized.

In Greek lyric poetry, the first two syllables of the Phalaecian hendecasyllable are *anceps*. On the other hand, in other Roman Phalaecians such as those of Varro the two opening syllables always form a spondee. Given the small number of Varronian verses preserved, this difference could be assigned to chance were it not for our knowledge that Varro misunderstood the fundamental metra of this verse. The Roman grammarian Caesius Bassus informs us that Varro understood the Phalaecian as a form of ionic trimeter *a minore*. This division of the verse sees the first three syllables as a contracted ionic metron yielding three long syllables. Such an understanding of the verse makes it impossible to construct a Phalaecian beginning with anything but a spondaic base. In his study of Catullan metrical patterns, Otto Skutsch points out a marked change in the base of Catullus' Phalaecians over the course of his *libellus* (Skutsch 1969). In the first half of the polymetric poems Catullus' Phalaecians are almost exclusively spondaic; in the second half they admit either iambic or trochaic beginnings over twenty percent of the time. This change suggests that at some point Catullus stopped composing his Phalaecians according to Varro's model and began to follow Greek examples more closely. It also aligns his practice with that of the other *poeti novi* who likewise admit trochees and iambic beginnings in their verses.

Catullus's poem 42 seems to show an awareness of this issue in contemporary metrical theory in a pun at the end of the poem. This poem, addressed to the hendecasyllables themselves, is an especially appropriate setting for metrical play. The semantic interplay of meaning and meter is further activated for the reader by clever metrical tricks such as the one achieved in line 10: *circumsistite eam et reflagitate*. Here the verses obey Catullus' command before the reader's eyes by literally surrounding the pronoun *eam*, which is cleverly elided so as to allow a new hendecasyllabic sequence, *circumsistite...et reflagitate*, to surround it on the page. The lines addressed to the female notebook thief, *moecha putida redde codicillos / redde putida moecha codicillos* (11-12, 19-20), continue to raise metrical awareness as the word order changes but the uncommon trochaic beginning remains the same. When repeated changes in word order fail him, Catullus orders his verses to change their approach in metrically loaded language, punning on the dual meaning of *modus*: *mutanda est ratio modusque vobis* (22). This prepares the reader for the final line, *pudica et proba, redde codicillos* (24), where the joke turns not only on the new complimentary language and the assonance of *putida* and *pudica*, but also on the unexpected metrical shift to an iambic opening. This pun will have been all the more droll since the admittance of trochees and iambs into the base of the hendecasyllable was a theoretical issue in Catullus' time.