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Why Nothing is Beautiful: Physical Attractiveness in Latin Literature

In poems 43 and 86 Catullus compares Lesbia's beauty to that of two other women: Ameana and Quintia, respectively. Here Catullus demonstrates two notable cultural constructions contributing to the Roman idea of physical beauty: 1) The absence of physical blemishes or flaws. 2) A harmonious relationship of parts to the whole. In this paper I will outline these two constructions and demonstrate how they inform the description of beauty in Roman literature.

The few scholars who have attempted to address the question of what was beautiful for the Romans (Karl Jax, *Der Frauentypus der Romischen Dichtung* ; Lloyd Thompson, *Romans and Blacks* ; Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*) have tended to summarize lists of features considered attractive by ancient authors. In my paper I will take a somewhat different approach, centered around the two constructions stated above.

The first, that beauty was a lack of flaws rather than one or more attractive features, is expressed in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* 1.79-80 by Cotta, who notes that if the gods had human forms, they should be free from blemishes. But, he says, if that is the case, they would all look exactly alike. Cotta's implication -- that there was a single, perfect beauty and that ugliness rested in how far one departed from this standard -- finds an interesting parallel in modern psychological theory. A study by Judith H. Langlois and Lori A. Roggman ("Attractive Faces are Only Average" *Psychological Science* vol. 1, no. 2 (1990) 115-121) indicates that humans may find attractive faces which represent the mean features of a given population.

That the Roman standard of beauty represented an extreme example of this norm-based conception is reflected in the descriptions of individuals in Roman literature. There are seemingly countless detailed descriptions of ugly or abnormal individuals but there are very few descriptive portraits of attractive ones; when beautiful people are described, it tends to be only in the vaguest terms.

One of the reasons for the Romans' tendency not to describe physical beauty may have had to do with the Stoic conception of beauty, as outlined in Cicero's *Disp. Tusc.* 4.31 and Plotinus' *Enneads* 1.6.1, "On Beauty". Cicero -- who says that beauty is an *apta figura membrorum* -- and Plotinus indicate that according to the Stoic view only a composite thing, and nothing single or simple, can be beautiful.

If beauty lies not in individual features, but in the harmonious relationship of the parts, this means that language -- which, as opposed to the visual arts, is more linear than holistic -- is particularly ill-suited to the description of beauty, hence Catullus' sparse treatment of Lesbia's appearance and full treatment of Ameana and Quintia in poems 43 and 86.