

Poem 55 is the only Catullan poem that presents the aristocratic male speaker interacting with street-walking female prostitutes in Rome, with crude but humorous results. Scholars have generally overlooked the rich interpretive ground this exchange offers in terms of Roman gender and social dynamics, focusing instead on details of topography (Wiseman 1979, 1980a, 1980b, Richardson 1980) and biography (Slater 1974, Wiseman 1976 & 1981, Rawson 1978). This paper fills this gap by situating the poem in its literary rather than historical context. I argue that poem 55 develops themes of comic invective and social/gender competition found elsewhere in Catullus's work. As in poems 10 and 36/37, Catullus depicts his speaker as a socially-inferior stock figure from Roman Comedy attempting to wear the guise of superior blocking figures, only to be overthrown by a clever female rogue. Catullus uses comic characters from the stage to elevate cleverness as a means to authority over traditional martial, social, and political values in Rome.

Building on Condorelli (1965) and Agnesini (2004), who note linguistic parallels between poem 55 and Plautine speech, I argue that Catullus draws on several type-scenes from Roman Comedy (including "wild-goose chase" monologues at *Amphitruo* 1009-1016 and *Epidicus* 194-200 (Christensen 2000) and Ballio's menacing of prostitutes at *Pseudolus* 172-229) to sketch his speaker as a hybrid comic blocking figure. Shifting between *servus currens*, *miles gloriosus*, and *leno* (representatives of traditional methods of control: Segal 1968), the speaker puts on comic guises to bolster his authority, but he meets his match when he tries to browbeat female prostitutes at the Porticus Pompei. Tagged as *meretrices callidae* by the word *pessimae* (which Anderson 1993 shows is a marker of "Heroic Badness" that accompanies clever inversions of status in Plautus's plays), the women subvert the speaker's usurped power using humorous *malitia*. This Plautine exchange's proximity to Pompey's Theater also marks the poem metatheatrically as a miniature comedy (cf. Erasmo 2004 on Pompey's Theater and theatricality of reality in Catullus's age).

Poem 55's Plautine vignette parallels other poems where the Catullan speaker attempts to appropriate authoritative comic figures before being overthrown by a clever inferior, including poem 10 (the speaker-as-parasite plays at being a *miles gloriosus* until Varus's clever girlfriend deflates his pretensions (Nappa 1996; Bernek 2004)) and poems 36/37 (the speaker blusters as a *miles gloriosus* (Wray 2001) until his *puella* undercuts him with a clever joke). I argue that these poems use shared comic tropes and humorous subversions of the speaker to celebrate cleverness as a way for even traditionally powerless people in Rome (i.e., women) to assert themselves over other forms of power (socio-economic in 55, military in 10, and literary in 36/37). These female figures provide *a fortiori* arguments for the value of cleverness as a means to authority, both in 1st century BCE Rome and programmatically within Catullus's poetry (cf. Anderson 1993 and McCarthy 2000, who argue that clever rogues perform the same function in 3rd-2nd century BCE Roman society and Comedy). Catullus's use of figures at opposite poles of the spectrum of comic social power in these poems thus elevates *calliditas* as a prime virtue for emulation by people of all social levels, while at the same time prefiguring the cleverly dominant *docta puella* of Latin love elegy.