

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON SOME CATULLAN QUESTIONS

WISEMAN (T.P.) *Catullan Questions Revisited*. Pp. x + 176, b/w & colour ills, colour maps. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £75, US\$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-009-23574-7.

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‘Forty-four is probably a good age to stop writing about Catullus, if not already a bit late’, so W. in 1985 (*Catullus and his World*, p. x). Thankfully, in his early eighties, W. has had a change of heart. He here adds another item to his long list of books on the poetry and world of Catullus – of *important* books, I should say. Though W., with some justification, likes to present himself as an iconoclast, far removed from ‘the party line’ (p. 54), no one has been more influential on Catullan studies in the last 50 years. A new book by W. demands our attention and respect.

Like the earlier book to which its title alludes (*Catullan Questions* [1969]), *Catullan Questions Revisited* is organised into two parts. Part 2 offers three loosely related essays on Transpadane history, erotic performance at Rome and various novelists’ reception of Lesbia. Part 1 – the more important half of the book – contains four carefully interwoven chapters on a range of Catullan questions, some of which, in part thanks to W., remain central to the subfield (Who was Lesbia? How many books did the poet write?); others are more particular to the author (Where did Catullus perform his short poems? Were all the long poems performed?).

There is a great deal in this slim book that is attractive and good. W.’s prose is eminently readable, thoughtfully engaged with recent scholarship (especially J. Schafer, *Catullus Through his Books* [2020]; I. Du Quesnay and T. Woodman [edd.], *The Cambridge Companion to Catullus* [2021]), and veritably brimming with evidence and ideas. Some of these ideas are both new and compelling: for instance, that the respective *dramatic* (my word: see below) settings of poems 4 and 14b are Sirmione (pp. 50–5) and a bookshop (pp. 18–21). Others are old but deserving of recapitulation and defence: that the poems date to 56–55 BCE (p. 4); that the real Lesbia is unlikely to have been Clodia Metelli (pp. 4–12; W. now thinks that she was a daughter of Appius Claudius Pulcher, which could be right); and that Catullus wrote more than the 116-ish poems that have come down to us – in fact, he probably wrote mimes (pp. 42–7). W.’s new defence of this last idea, which he first proposed in *Catullus and his World* and which has since been met with widespread scepticism, strikes me as particularly important. Where he had earlier predicated his argument on an infamously tenuous interpretation of poem 116, W. here wisely relegates his reading of that poem to a footnote (p. 42 n. 170) and more firmly places his discussion on the evidence: that Pollio and Varro call Catullus by his *nomen* ‘Valerius’; that Cicero mentions a contemporary mimographer named ‘Valerius’, whom Priscian twice seems to quote; that Martial and Juvenal mention a ‘Catullus’ who wrote mimes; and that the Berne Scholia attribute to Catullus a prose text, called something like *On Mime-Performance* (the title is corrupt). I am not sure that this accumulation of circumstantial evidence *proves* W.’s argument (*pace* p. 46), but it does, to my mind, establish the argument’s fundamental probability. There is something solid for others to build on here.

Frustratingly, W. does not argue all of his many ideas to a comparable point of probability, and too often I found myself wishing that he would either slow down and fully defend what he was saying or just not say it at all. So, regarding Chapter 2’s discussion of the central Catullan Question, ‘How Many Books?’, W. wants us to believe that there is a ‘good chance’ (p. 36) that we have a copy of Cornelius Nepos’ own private version of poems 1–60, which consists of two

separate books (poems 2–14; poems 14b–53), one poem that Catullus wrote for Nepos and Nepos alone (poem 1), and seven scrap-poems (poems 54–60) that Nepos personally attached to these *libelli*. Well, none of this is impossible, but far too many of the points in W.'s ingenious story are half-defended – asserted more than argued. For instance, is the mere fact that poem 53, like poem 14, mentions Calvus' feud with Vatinius really enough to establish it as the concluding text of a Catullan *libellus* (p. 35)? Why does an allusion to poem 52 in Pliny the Elder suggest that it was included in this *libellus* (p. 35)? How likely is it that poem 1 is a 'personal gift-dedication poem' (p. 25), considering that it is practically a literary manifesto (cf. W., *Clio's Cosmetics* [1979], pp. 167–74), which seems explicitly to aspire towards a wide readership (1.9–10)? Nothing that W. claims in his novel answer to this Catullan question is impossible, but 'not impossible' is not quite the goal to which classical scholarship should be aspiring.

Some of the claims in the book are at best 'not impossible' for a particular reason. Although he in part built his reputation by debunking Schwabe and other heavy-handed Catullan biographers (cf. *JRS* 69 [1979], 161–8), in practice W. tends to write as if these poems were literal and transparent historical documents – a collection of reliable data out of which the historian can reconstruct the poet's life and the precise occasions of his poems. Hyperbole, figurative language, creative invention etc. – at times W. forgets that these slippery things exist. Witness his treatment of poem 4. Given its address to *hospites* (4.1) and its probable setting in Sirmione, W. argues that this poem was composed, and provides evidence, for a particular historical event: Catullus once entertained his father's friends on the shores of Lake Garda by telling them about his boat (pp. 50–5). Similarly, according to W., when Catullus suggests that his brother's death put an end to his ability to write poetry (poem 68a.19–20, 25–6; cf. 65.3–4), 'we have to accept what he says' (p. 41): that is, we have to accept that Catullus could no longer compose personal poetry – after writing poems 65, 68a and 101 (the ones that mention *frater*), he turned to other endeavours, namely, according to W., composing mime for the stage (pp. 40–2, 79–81).

The problems here are obvious. Catullus is a poet: he writes about his life and world; but he also invents and exaggerates, a point that is empirically true (or would W. maintain that Lesbia really did burst the *ilia* of *trecenti moechi*?). In the absence of direct external evidence, there is consequently no good reason why we should believe that poem 4 is a record of a historical performance rather than a creative work inspired by life and literature in content and occasion (I am not insisting that the former option is *a priori* impossible, only that W.'s belief in its likelihood is under-justified). Likewise, although there are certainly elements of autobiography in poem 68a (it would seem perverse, for instance, to deny that Catullus had a brother who did in fact die), it is uncomfortable to infer from that poem the particular and elaborate autobiography that W. infers. In fact, considering that, on W.'s reading, Catullus proclaims he has abandoned poetry *in the middle of a poem*, it is impossible just to 'accept what he says' in a literal, historical way (and it is wildly speculative to suggest that it was this tragedy that inspired Catullus to become a mimographer: there is not a shred of evidence for that improbable connection).

The back cover of the book announces that it 'explode[s] the orthodox view of Catullus' life and work'. For 'explodes' substitute 'pokes and prods' and, yes, that is true. Much in the volume is likely to be met with scepticism; but some of its arguments are of real importance; and, overall, the work is thought-provoking and brilliant in its particular, maddening, Wisemanian way.

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