

Introduction

The curtain comes down, the audience departs, the actors and stagehands and musicians finish up before heading out for the night. The play is done, and there is nothing left but to move on to the next thing – or so we often presume. When it comes to drama, we tend to focus only on the play itself and forget all the thinking about and playing with the play that we keep doing once we leave the theater. But the theater leaves with us and lingers on in our thoughts, just as the poet Lucretius observes it did with Romans in the first century BCE (4.973–83):

et quicumque dies multos ex ordine ludis assiduas dederunt operas, plerumque videmus, cum iam destiterunt ea sensibus usurpare,	975
relicuas tamen esse vias in mente patentis, qua possint eadem rerum simulacra venire. per multos itaque illa dies eadem obversantur ante oculos, etiam vigilantes ut videantur	
cernere saltantis et mollia membra moventis et citharae liquidum carmen chordasque loquentis auribus accipere et consessum cernere eundem scaenaique simul varios splendere decores.	980

And anyone who has been glued to the festivals for days on end without a break, we very often see, once they have stopped taking them in with their senses, there are still paths that remain open in their minds through which the images of these same things can enter. And so for many days these same things appear before their eyes, even while they are awake, so they seem to perceive dancers as they move their supple limbs and to hear in their ears the pure song and expressive strings of the cithara and to perceive that the same crowd and the assorted embellishments of the stage glimmer as well.

By the time Lucretius' hypothetical audience member departs, the sights and sounds of the stage have so fully infiltrated his mind that they become a sort of waking dream, playing out again and again alongside whatever new sensations and thoughts his "real" life offers. And even Lucretius himself seems to undergo a similar impulsive recall of the dramatic world, conjuring up elements from the stage throughout the fourth book of *De rerum natura*: notions about atomic properties of color bring to his mind performances beneath the vibrant awnings of crowded venues (72–86); he envisions a theatrical mask while illustrating the complex optics of mirrors (292–301); and in the ridiculous behavior of lovers he finds echoes of countless young men from Roman comedies who squander their fortunes, dignity, and well-being for the sake of their beloveds (1121–91). As he goes about his work, such reminiscences from the theater repeatedly intervene. But these are not moments of psychotic possession that hinder his ability to engage with the everyday world. In fact, quite the opposite: his theatrical visions give him tools to understand the obscure nature of things and to share those strange insights with other Romans through the familiar vocabulary of the stage.¹ Lucretius thus shows how drama embeds itself deep in the psyches of its audience, offering them a new, theatrically augmented reality with which they can more fully comprehend the world and connect with their fellow theatergoers.

This notion serves as the foundation of this book, which explores the cultural memory of theater in Rome and what happens to Roman drama, and to comedy in particular, after its *floruit* in the third and second centuries BCE. As a broader goal, I am interested in trying to identify what the Roman audience does with comedy after the show seems to be over: How does the experience of this genre change and continue, where and how does it enter the vernacular of people outside the theater and join the language of literary allusion, and in what ways does it find fresh life for new ends in unfamiliar venues? My attention rests especially in the last years of the Roman Republic and in the work of one of Lucretius' contemporaries, the poet Catullus, whose engagement with Roman comedy has long and often been noted, albeit in scattershot fashion. More than a century ago, E. P. Morris first pointed out that Catullus' poem 8 (*miser Catulle, desinas ineptire*) recalls the plaintive soliloquy of the *adulescens amator*, or "young lover" stock type from Roman comedy, though his

¹ On Lucretius' engagement with the theater in *DRN* 4, see L. R. Taylor (1952), Rosivach (1980), Brown (1987 ad locc.), Goldberg (2005, 98), Hanses (2015, 91–107), B. Taylor (2016), and Chapter 2.

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argument took decades to gain any foothold in Catullan scholarship. Indeed, despite the refinement of Morris' observations by Marilyn Skinner and others, there remains skepticism that Roman comedy ought to be seen as a meaningful element of the poem, an issue that Sander Goldberg captures succinctly:²

Whether [the speaker of Catullus' poem 8] will be any more successful in his resolve than comedy's Phaedria or Calidorus may well be an open question. It is not, however, the kind of question that Catullan scholarship likes to entertain. Though the language, form, and thought of this poem may have comic analogues, scholars are reluctant to accept its comic roots... At heart, this resistance is less to the influence of comedy in general than to that of Roman comedy in particular... This Greek focus is the legacy of Friedrich Leo, who was a great lover of Plautus but nevertheless thought only a "falsche Methode" would attribute the affinities of comedy and later love poetry to anything more than similarities of subject and a common grounding in Greek precedents.

James Uden voices a similar sentiment in his study of Catullus' allusions to the "young lover" of Roman comedy in his epigrams, where he remarks that "despite these apparent correspondences, the degree to which Catullus' passionate persona is indebted to the comic *adulescens* has been a matter of rather scattered debate."³ He and others have observed numerous moments throughout the corpus when Catullus appropriates Roman comedy's erotic discourses while reflecting on the literary, personal, and public experience of love.⁴ It is difficult, however, for readers to square up an author who seems so genuine, unfiltered, and intimate with a genre that revels in its ostensible superficiality and staginess. Elizabeth Manwell notes that "most of his readers persist in a belief that Catullus offers us a window into his life, a sincere emotional outpouring of love or disgust. The source of anxiety for many lies in an attempt to reconcile (or more frequently, to ignore) those aspects of the Catullan poetic identity that do not accord

² Morris (1909). Wheeler (1934, 227–30) was an early proponent of his interpretation, but it was rejected or ignored by scholars (e.g., Elder [1951, 104]) until the 1960s, when Commager (1965, 91–92) and others began endorsing it. Especially useful developments of Morris' ideas are found in Skinner (1971), McCormick (1981), Thomas (1984), Selden (1992, 500–505), Gaisser (2009, 56–57). Quotation is from Goldberg (2005, 102); Leo remarks (1912, 143), "Es ist aber Zweifel, dass Tibull Properz Ovid jede andere Lektüre eher als die der plautinischen Komödien getrieben haben."

³ Uden (2006, 19).

⁴ Besides Uden (2006), see, e.g., Konstan (1986), Minarini (1987, 59–79), Agnesini (2004), O'Bryhim (2007), and Hanses (2015, 107–36).

with the persona of the sincere lover.”⁵ How could such a paragon of sincerity find anything meaningful in the clichés of comic theater?

But Roman comedy’s clichés abound in Catullus, and if we work the question backward from that fact, we find a partial answer: Catullus is not “sincere,” at least as the Romantics would use the term, spontaneously pouring out emotion and unfiltered experience. Rather, he voices his work through a carefully constructed persona. The idea of the literary persona is now sufficiently established in scholarship that we need not rehash it here, except to observe that the gap between comic *adulescentes* like Plautus’ Calidorus or Terence’s Phaedria and “Catullus,” the speaker in the poems of the first-century BCE poet Gaius Valerius Catullus, is illusory, since each of these is a fictional young man whose role is scripted by a Roman poet.⁶ However curious or provocative it might be to find the Catullan speaker impersonating stock types from Roman comedy (and one of my aims in this book is to show that this choice *is* curious and provocative), the basic notion that one literary figure can be made to act like another one should not surprise.

But another part of the answer can be found in an observation by Uden, namely that even living, breathing, “real” Romans found utility and convenience in conforming their characters to cultural and literary stereotypes and, what is more, that “the new comic *adulescens* had acquired its own cultural force as the popular archetype of the irresponsible young man in love.”⁷ On the one hand, comedy’s “young lover” was an appealing target for allusion and emulation precisely because he is familiar and seems, in his own ridiculous way, to endure the tribulations common to actual young people in love. This is certainly how Lucretius employs the *adulescens* at 4.1121–91, where he serves as the textbook case of terminal lovesickness and exhibits all of the symptoms from which his reader might diagnose erotic mania.⁸ Feelings need not be novel and unique to an individual for them to be meaningful, and anyway no emotion under the sun is new, as Terence implies in the famous prologue to his *Eunuchus*

⁵ Manwell (2007, 121).

⁶ Persona theory first came to prominence in English studies with Kernan (1959) and found its way into Classical scholarship through Anderson (1964 and 1982), Winkler (1983), and Braund (1988). For good overviews of the persona in Catullan scholarship, see Nappa (2001, 15–35) and Wray (2001, 1–35, 161–67, 203–6), with fuller survey in Polt (2018). I use the name “Catullus” throughout this book to refer to both the poet and his speaker, but when context does not make clear which I mean, I try to clarify.

⁷ Uden (2006, 23)

⁸ Rosivach (1980) and Brown (1987, 248–307). For similar psychological readings of Catull. 8’s comic elements, see Skinner (1971) and Gaisser (2009, 55–60), alongside remarks by Uden (2006, 20).

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(35–41), a prime model, we will see, for Catullan erotics: “But if our poet can’t use the same characters as others do, how on earth can he write of . . . love, hatred, and suspicion? After all, there’s nothing said now that hasn’t been said before.”⁹ If everything that we experience is always already hackneyed and generic, what could be more useful for understanding and expressing those experiences than the most hackneyed and generic characters?

On the other hand, although personal poetry is ostensibly an inward-looking genre, it also represents a public expression of character and values. This idea, Uden points out, is the basis of conflict in Catullus’ poem 16 (*pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*), in which the speaker aggressively rebukes Furius and Aurelius for reading the character of the poet’s work onto the character of the poet himself. However we interpret the complexities of the poem, it clearly implies that Catullus’ contemporary readers understood poetry as one of the myriad ways by which Romans in the late Republic could engage in self-fashioning and self-positioning within the hierarchy of elite social discourse.¹⁰ An allusion to the *adulescens amator* stock type was not merely a game of literary navel-gazing, but rather acted as shorthand for a whole set of ethical suppositions that the writer could convey quickly to readers in the theatrical know. And the particular values (or rather, antivalues) that the comic “young lover” embodies – indifference or hostility to *negotium* and *pietas*, prioritization of personal pleasure over public responsibility, rejection of emotional restraint and stability, and so on – gave Catullus and other Romans who were disillusioned with the *mos maiorum* an alternative model and a recognizable stance from which to critique aristocratic social norms.¹¹ To align oneself with the comic “young lover” was to embrace “a cultural paradigm that violates the protocols of expected behaviour for elite males,” not unlike American men channeling James Dean’s rebel without a cause, Jim Stark, or Matthew Broderick’s Ferris Bueller.¹²

Although the stock character of the young lover has, unsurprisingly, received the bulk of attention in scholarship on Catullus’ engagement with Roman comedy, the *adulescens amator* is not the only comic figure that has

⁹ Ter. *Eun.* 35–41: *quod si personis isdem huic uti non licet, / qui mage licet . . . scribere . . . / amare, odisse, suspicari? denique / nullumst iam dictum quod non dictum sit prius.*

¹⁰ For poetry as expression of character, see Clay (1998), Mayer (2003), and Iddeng (2005).

¹¹ See Duckworth (1952, 237–42) on the generic attributes of the comic *adulescens*, explored more fully in Chapters 2 and 3. Janan (1994) and Wray (2001) trace some of the ways in which Catullus challenges elite citizen male norms.

¹² Uden (2006, 21).

been sighted in his poetry. Skinner and Christopher Nappa, for example, show that Catullus employs the comic parasite as an invective marker in several poems about social competition, while David Wray, Rüdiger Bernek, and Julia Gaisser likewise discern the presence of the *miles gloriosus*, or “braggart soldier,” in similar contexts.¹³ Indeed, an almost full cast of comic characters has been spotted in the Catullan corpus: besides the stock types that I name above, scholars have also glimpsed the *meretrix*, or sex laborer; the *senex durus*, or “harsh old man”; the pimp; and so forth.¹⁴ It is no coincidence, I think, that many of these scholars have also played critical roles in introducing and normalizing persona theory in work on Catullus: the idea that the Catullan speaker is a fictive “mask” (the basic meaning of the Latin word *persona*) that the poet crafts and speaks through has set the stage for readers to observe him impersonating other theatrical roles as well, and the past decade and a half of scholarship has gradually revealed that Catullus repeatedly turns to the Roman comic tradition for inspiration.¹⁵

Despite this growing recognition of comedy’s presence in Catullus’ poetry, though, there has never been a large-scale, systematic account of how this foundational Roman genre operates in the Catullan corpus. Indeed, although separate allusions have been readily acknowledged, the notion that Roman comedy as a whole presented writers after the second century BCE a meaningful source of cultural and artistic value (in the same way that, say, the genre of epic or Callimachean aesthetics are seen clearly to have done) still is not fully appreciated.¹⁶ What is missing, and what this book aims to provide – if only in part – is this larger contextualization and answers to related questions, such as: What do these allusions to Roman comedy that appear throughout his poetry do for Catullus, his speaker, and his audience? How are Romans of Catullus’ day experiencing comedy and how does that experience, either of plays themselves or of allusions to them outside the theater, relate to their contemporary values,

¹³ Skinner (1979), Nappa (2001, 85–105 and 112–14), Wray (2001, 80–87), Bernek (2004), Gaisser (2009, 51–55).

¹⁴ On the *senex durus*, see Nappa (2001, 54–55); on the *meretrix*, Skinner (1989) and Selden (1992); on the *leno*, Goldberg (2005, 105–14). Note that I use “sex laborer” throughout this book to translate the word *meretrix* for the reasons articulated by Witzke (2015) except when trying to convey the value judgments that particular ancient individuals bring to the term.

¹⁵ *OLD* s.v. *persona* 1; see Chapter 1 for discussion of the significance of this meaning and related etymologies for the Roman conception of the self.

¹⁶ Newman (1990, 3–24) draws attention to the emphasis on Alexandrian aesthetics in Catullus’ work to the exclusion of influences from Roman comedy, tracing some ways in which Plautus is a more likely source for ideas and terms that have been traditionally associated with Callimachus (e.g., *nugae*, *lepus*).

interests, and anxieties? What mechanisms stand behind allusions to drama in non-dramatic poetry and how does their integration into personal poetry shape the trajectory of literature in Rome? Besides contributing to the catalog of Catullus' comic allusions further examples that have gone unnoticed or inadequately treated, I aim to sketch a more coherent picture of Catullus' engagement with Roman comedy and to show that individual points of contact with this genre in his work are part of a larger, more sustained poetic program than has been recognized.

Roman comedy, I argue, offers Catullus a common cultural vocabulary, drawn from the public stage and shared with his audience, with which to explore and convey private ideas about love, friendship, and social rivalry. Further, Catullus' use of Roman comedy is not isolated, but represents part of a larger communicative phenomenon among Romans of his era. The gods and heroes of tragedy remained eloquent symbols for ancient writers, but comedy – long considered *infra dignitatem* for “respectable” authors of the first century BCE – also offered them a powerful tool for navigating their complex social relations.¹⁷ Roman comedy developed hand-in-hand with Rome itself in the third and second centuries BCE, working together and in tension with one another in establishing political, social, and cultural values, as well as a sense of unity and stability for their population.¹⁸ But as these began to break down in the twilight of the Republic, comedy served as both a touchstone of Romans' cultural patrimony and contested space for ethical discourse that the elite used to define their communal and personal identities in the face of a century of civil unrest and the consequent disruptions of traditional values. For some, such as Cicero, Roman comedy came to represent an instrument to recall, promote, and reinforce the *mos maiorum*, how things had been at the height of Rome's self-confidence as the ascendant power in the Mediterranean, when the genre first materialized and flourished on the public stage. For others, such as Catullus, the genre's everyday anti-values would offer a means to reflect on and critique those very same

¹⁷ Sharrock (2009, ix–x) discusses this attitude among scholars, which Fontaine (2014, 180) summarizes: “Roman comedy frequently embarrasses Latinists . . . it is usually seen as an outlier, a misfit that does not really belong with the rest of Latin literature.” Even Wheeler (1934), who first drew Morris (1909) to wider attention, attributed the poem's comic elements to Catullus' “knowledge of Greek literature” (228); see also Wheeler (1910), who remarks that “the Augustan elegists did not read Plautus and Terence” (442), and Griffin (1985, 199), who asserts that the absence of Plautus' and Terence's names from Augustan poetry “proves only that they were not creditable, not in fashion, not that they had made no contribution.”

¹⁸ For relationships between the genre's development and that of Roman society itself, see Leigh (2004) and Richlin (2014).

mores, as well as to contemplate the paradoxes involved in revolting against a system in which they nevertheless yearned to participate. And for everyone in Rome, traditionalist and iconoclast alike, comedy presented a convenient set of ethical touchstones with which to identify and to site themselves and those around them within the shifting flows of Roman moral, social, and political relations.

Romanus Palliatus: Comedy's Catullan Allure

We can safely posit, then, that Catullus uses Roman comedy extensively in his work. But *why comedy*? What about this genre caught Catullus' attention in the first place? I have already nodded toward some of the value I think he and other Romans found in thinking with the theater generally, and Plautus and Terence specifically, and subsequent chapters of this book examine the effects of Catullus' and his contemporaries' invocations of individual comic characters and schticks. But here seems an appropriate place to say something about the broader reasons why Catullus would find Roman comedy an appealing target of allusion and reflection. Three aspects of the genre are especially pertinent: (1) a nugatory sensibility; (2) a domestic, urban, and local perspective; and (3) an interest in Greco-Roman hybridity and translation. Throughout this book, I return to these overarching themes, as they can be seen to undergird Catullus' engagement with Roman comedy. In this introduction, though, I want to sketch their essential features by using a few examples in the Catullan corpus that highlight the poet's theatrical outlook but whose comic substructure has gone overlooked or underappreciated.

Nugatory Sensibilities (Poems 1, 16, 12, and 25)

In his programmatic opening poem, Catullus calls his work “a charming new booklet” (*lepidum novum libellum*, 1.1) and “trifles” (*nugas*, 1.4); he makes an equally evocative literary claim in poem 16, where he defends his verses on the grounds that “they have wit and charm” (*habent salem ac leporem*, 16.4), even if they are “a bit naughty” (*parum pudicum*, 16.4). These have been read as two of the most revolutionary and distinctive statements of Catullus' poetics, as well as defining qualities of his neoteric contemporaries.¹⁹ Their work, they assert, pulls away from the traditional,

¹⁹ On the programmatic function of poem 1, see Copley (1951) and Batstone (1998, 2007). On the metapoetic significance of poem 16, see, e.g., Sandy (1971), Buchheit (1976), and Fitzgerald (1995, 34–58).

focusing on little things and social niceties their predecessors ignored, those objects and events that are peripheral to Roman thought but central to their lived experiences: an affectionate moment with a pet, a meal shared with a friend, a looming mortgage payment, erotic strife, and all the other bits and bobs that fill out most of our days but about which we spare little thought – that is, until a poet like Catullus comes along to help us sense the weight of this social, emotional, and material unconscious. Part of what makes Catullus’ work successful is that he “writes what his culture defines as ‘trifles,’ but by virtue of the care he lavishes on them proves himself a dedicated and serious Alexandrian poet.”²⁰

But while the elevation of the small, graceful, and witty over the bloated and thunderous was indeed the calling card of an Alexandrian, and specifically Callimachean, poet, there is more to Catullus’ elaborate polishing of the quotidian than an attempt to copy Hellenistic aesthetics.²¹ The catchwords Catullus deploys so expressively in these metapoetic statements – *lepos/lepidus*, *nugae*, *sal* – came loaded with social, cultural, and literary significance in Latin literature long before the arrival of Alexandrian literature on Italian shores. J. K. Newman shows that Plautus deploys these terms as metapoetic shorthand for comic playfulness and trickery and suggests these valences should also be considered in understanding Catullus’ poetic program.²² I take his observation a step further and argue that Catullus expressly draws inspiration for his poetics, in part, from Roman comedy – and indeed, that the traditional understanding of what makes his work “nugatory” misses the mark by ignoring these words’ comic connotation. *Nugae*, *lepos*, and *sal* are not simply about elevating the typically trivial through extreme polish; they are the characteristics of a person who can imbue people and things with alternate meaning, of the playwright who turns actors into characters, clothing into costumes, and everyday objects into stage properties that signify more than they normally could. The point of Catullus’ nugatory poetics lies not merely in highlighting the quotidian, but in his ability to transform the quotidian and extraordinary alike into something else altogether.

²⁰ Fitzgerald (1995, 44), said tongue-in-cheek to critique the uncritical opposition of surface and depth in interpretations of Catullus’ metapoetic statements.

²¹ For primarily Callimachean readings of Catullus’ programmatic poetry, see Elder (1967) and Cairns (1969). Although quotidian objects and the materiality of poetry appear in Callimachus, they do not play nearly as large a role as in Catullus; for examples, see Cameron (1995, 443) and Phillips (2013).

²² Alexandrian poetry and poetics probably arrived in Rome at the end of the second century BCE; see Fantuzzi and Hunter (2004, 462–67) and bibliography cited there for a good overview of the chronological issues, especially as relates to Callimachus and Hellenistic epigram.

Significantly, all three of Catullus' poetic terms appear side by side in one particularly metatheatrical scene from Roman comedy. In the middle of Plautus' *Curculio*, the *choragus* (a stage professional in charge of costumes for the acting troupe) comes onstage to break the fourth wall and laud the play's eponymous parasite (462–64):²³

edepol **nugatorem lepidum lepide** hunc nantust Phaedromus.
halophantam an sycophantam magis ess' dicam nescio.
 ornamenta quae locavi metuo ut possim recipere.

By Pollux, this guy that Phaedromus has gotten is a charmingly charming trifter. Whether I should say that he's a sharp fellow or a swindler, I just don't know. I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to get back the costumes that I hired out to him.

Curculio is described as *lepidus*, *nugator*, and *halophanta*, that is, “salt-shower” (ἄλς + φαίνεῖν). I think it is not a coincidence that these are three of Catullus' most prominent poetic buzzwords (*lepidum*, 1.1; *nugas*, 1.4; *salem ac leporem*, 16.4). The context of the *choragus'* accolades suggests Plautus' comic parasite was a meaningful exemplum for our poet. Immediately after these lines, the *choragus* gives the audience a tour not of Epidaurus, where the play is set, but of Rome itself, where the play is being produced, pointing out places and people they would see as they turned their attention away from the *scaena* and back to their regular lives once the show was over. Timothy Moore argues persuasively that this would present a disturbing moment for the spectators. *Curculio* centers on deception and false identity, and “Plautus paints a picture of an Epidaurus with a greater share of deceit than an average comedy requires.” By erasing the boundaries between the imaginary and the “real” worlds, the *choragus* implies the characters have broken out of their Epidaurian fiction and are free in Rome itself. While watching the play so far, the audience learned that the parasite has the power to trick other characters with ease and devastating consequences. Now we see Curculio is on the loose and can come for us, too – and incognito to boot, since he has raided the stage shop. The divide between literary and real breaks down, and our appreciation for the power of costumes and props goes up.²⁴ Indeed, Curculio is

²³ Newman cites this passage for understanding Catullus' terminology, but he does not develop the idea that it may be programmatic. Copley (1951, 201–2) also attributes *lepidus* to “the sphere of everyday, ordinary life and behavior” and says Catullus chose it to show poetic affiliation “not only of the amusing, agreeable, amiable, and charming, but of these qualities *in their popular guise*,” though he does not connect it to Roman comedy. Moore (1991, 343) calls this “perhaps the strangest passage in all of Plautus.”

²⁴ Moore (1991, 360–61).