

Christopher NAPPA
Egnatius' Smile: Reading Catullus' *Salax taberna*

Exciting as it is, there exist virtually no attempts to come to grips with Catullus' *Salax taberna* (c. 37)--a poem often read but easily misunderstood--beyond purely philological commentary or efforts to locate it within a hypothetical reconstruction of the Lesbia affair. In this paper, I present a reading of c. 37 which will show that it, like poem 16, deals primarily with questions of effeminacy and virility, and that, again like poem 16, it has much to do with Catullus and his relationship to other men, but very little to do with Lesbia.

To accomplish this, I make the following four points. (1) Military language is used to characterize Catullus as an effeminate whose rivals not only enjoy the favors of his girlfriend, but also point up his inferiority in the realm of the masculine. (2) The role of the *puella*: it can be easily seen that the *puella* in c. 37 serves only to define and focus the relationship between Catullus and his male rivals. Even the grammatical structure of the passage describing her (11-16) bears this out. (3) The word *sopionibus*: I accept the now orthodox view that the word means "penis," and will show that Catullus' threat to inscribe the front of the house is simply another way of describing the oral rape envisioned in lines 7-8. (4) Egnatius' pretty, but urine-enhanced smile: since the Romans, not always through ignorance, confused urination and ejaculation, I argue that Egnatius' habit of cleaning his teeth with urine is once again a reference to fellatio--thus Egnatius is guilty not only of bad hygiene but also of sexual immorality.

After making these four points, I will review the connections between poem 37 and the Catullan corpus as a whole, particularly poems 16 and 22. My aim is to show that c. 37 deserves full critical attention as a major text in the poet's corpus, that it, like many more familiar Catullan texts, explores important and provocative themes without simply showing the author's invective bravado.