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CATULLAN EXTREMISM IN FORTUNATUS' POEMS TO AGNES

There is no little irony in the fact that scholars now possess two editions of Fortunatus' poetry published in the twenty-first century, [1] while interpretation of what the poet wrote substantially ended in the nineteenth. This paper takes a small step toward redressing this large lacuna by offering a reading of *carm.* 11.5, a poem of friendship written to Agnes, abbess of the Convent of the Holy Cross sometime in the 580s. It analyzes the ways in which Fortunatus frames his friendship through allusion to the poetry of Catullus. In its listing of *loci classici*, Leo's *MGH* edition of 1881 corroborates enough knowledge of Catullus to proceed on the premise that Fortunatus knew substantially the *carmina docta*.

Less easy to ascertain are the ways in which these *carmina* function interpretively in *carm.* 11.5. I focus first on the presence of Catullus 63.39, *sed ubi oris aurei Sol radiantibus oculis*, at Fortunatus 11.5.9, *audio, somnus iners radiantes pressit ocellos*. The line in Fortunatus' poem marks its midpoint, and the diction owed to Catullus 63 adds, by its emphatic placement at the line's end, to the interpretive moves the poet manages. The first half of the poem establishes Agnes' retreat by bemoaning her absence, praising her virginity, but also worrying over the rumors that have reached the poet. Agnes is, so Fortunatus has learned, fasting—perhaps excessively so.

Just then, as the poem reaches its midpoint, the phrase from Catullus 63 helps to develop the picture of excess Fortunatus paints, for the words that commend Agnes' "radiant little eyes" link to the precise moment in Catullus 63 when Attis awakens from his night of revelry to discover that he has eunichized himself. One implication immediately suggests itself: Fortunatus fears that Agnes' devotion, plied in the gloomy cloister of her latest retreat, will lead to unfortunate, and perhaps irreversible, results. A possible allusion to Catullus 62 in vv. 1-2 of Fortunatus' poem ramifies this depiction. There, the use of *virgo* and the phrase *inmaculata manes* (*Dulce decus nostrum Christi sanctissima virgo / Agnes quae meritis inmaculata manes*) reminds readers of Catullus 62.45, *sic virgo, dum intacta manet, dum cara suis est*.

This reminding complicates the picture Fortunatus otherwise avers. For, in verses in which the poet asserts Agnes' purity, Fortunatus alludes to a moment in Catullus' wedding hymn in which purity is challenged by images of chastity too vigorously pursued (vv. 39-47). The flower's beauty is sought by boys and girls, Catullus suggests, but once the flower fades, all is lost. Thus, though Fortunatus' poem ultimately would seem to accept Agnes' behavior as something she must practice on retreat, the warm praise that fills the poem's second half must be filtered through Catullus' diction, where warnings about extremism and the fading of the body's beauty otherwise tinge this praise—and further complicate what has normally been read, when it has been read at all, as a simple praise of Agnes' chastity.

[1] M. Reydellet, ed., *Poèmes: Venance Fortunat*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1994-2004) and S. Di Brazzano, ed., *Opere Venanzio Fortunato* (Rome, 2001). There is also the *MGH* edition of F. Leo (Berlin, 1881).