

CATULLUS 112

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THE TEXT IN V READ AS FOLLOWS (line 1 is defective; *cst qui suppl. Scaliger*):

*Multus homo es, Naso, neque tecum multus homo
descendit; Naso, multus es et pathicus.*

It has long been recognized that this epigram, as it stands in the tradition, is highly obscure.¹ Even if we are sure of the meaning to be attached to *multus* in its first and in its last occurrence, the verb *descendit* without any clear indication of context yields no satisfactory sense.² Further, even if *descendere* without such an indication could mean something like *in forum descendere*, why should Catullus—in what purports to be a short, stinging epigram directed against a *pathicus*—choose this of all ways of saying, “Nobody will associate with you?” To put it another way, why should the poet select a stroll down to the forum as the point where revulsion against Naso (and his morals) erupts? For one reason or another most editors agree that *descendit* needs emendation.

The remedies of Haupt (*te scindit*) and Schwabe (*homost quin / te scindat*) are unsatisfactory. I would suggest reading *est qui / discumbit*, in the sense, “reclines at table with you” (note *tecum* in line 1).

W. S. Watt (“Notes on Pseudo-Quintilian’s Minor Declamations,” *Illinois Classical Studies* 9 [1984] 53–78, at 63) dealing with *Decl. Min.* 296.2, . . . *ut fratrem non videris nisi ad te †descendentem†*, suggests *discumbentem*, “taking his place at dinner.”³ Watt adds: “As *TLL* 5.1.1365.16 says, this verb is occasionally used ‘de singulis,’ as at Quintilian *Inst.* 11.2.13” (see, for example, Petronius 57.1 and 2). It must be emphasized that *discumbit* appears to have no sexual overtones (and for the sake of the

¹At least since Salmassius, according to Ellis.

²In the examples cited in *OLD* 4, the addition of *in iudicium*, *in campum*, *in (ad) forum* prevails; and where these words are not explicitly added they are clearly to be understood from the context. (Thus the two instances of *ex Palatio descendere* manifestly imply *ad forum*; and the same is true of *Cic. Phil.* 2.6.15 and 8.2.6, where the verb is allowed to stand by itself, referring to highly-placed political figures). (Horace’s *quo descendere gestis* [*Ep.* 1.20.5] appears to parody this usage: the book is eager to exchange the tranquillity of a residence on the Palatine etc. for the business of the forum; cf. *Odes* 3.1.11.) We know nothing about Naso. Were his name a disguise for a public figure of sufficient standing to merit the poet’s attack (though Catullus uses no pseudonyms in similar invectives, so far as can be demonstrated, except for “Mentula” where the equation with Mamurra is crystal-clear), he would surely be escorted to the forum by a reasonably numerous *clientela*, whatever his private morals. If not, we certainly ought not to take *descendit*, without any context stated, as self-explanatory.

³M. Winterbottom, *The Minor Declamations Ascribed to Quintilian* (Berlin and New York 1984) 415: “Watt ingeniously suggests *discumbentem*, ‘dining at your house’.”

surprise-ending, of which more later, it is well that it should not); *TLL* cites only two passages where *discumbere* means "lie down *dormiendi causa*," and even these are devoid of any sexual suggestion.⁴

Doubt concerning the meaning of *multus* has contributed, as I remarked at the outset, to the apparent obscurity of the couplet. If, however, we consider—as surely we must—that *multus* here denotes a quality, careful examination of the passages cited in *TLL* will show that in the end the only eligible renderings are those subsumed under the concept of "tiresome" or "boring."⁵ Taken in this sense, *multus* is appropriately linked to *discumbit*; the dinner table is *par excellence* the place to avoid bores in one's immediate vicinity. By repeating *multus es* after the extended second statement, Catullus completes the process of lulling the reader into supposing that the entire burden of the complaint against Naso rests on the tiresomeness of his company; a very usual complaint, and sufficient in itself. The last two words, however, break the spell with a true *fulmen in clausula*, in the guise of an afterthought; something much worse is wrong with Naso, something that will make him a great deal more odious in the eyes of those who share a couch with him:⁶

You're a tedious fellow, Naso, and few seek your company on the dinner-couch; a bore, Naso—and a pansy as well!

I do not find it necessary to suppose, for the sake of "contrast," that the epigram opens in a complimentary vein, which is then negated in the second clause, but reasserted with the repetition of *multus es*, only to be negated again by *et pathicus*.⁷ To me, there is much more bite to the invective, and a much keener surprise at the last, if the tone is kept uniform up to the antepenultimate word. Contrast there certainly is; but it is a contrast of degree between undesirable qualities, pointed by the unexpectedness of the second (and stronger) accusation, not one of kind between good and evil.⁸

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⁴For the last observation I am indebted to Professor Watt.

⁵There seems to be no instance where *multus* means simply "active," in a good sense, at least in the classical period. Often it is linked with *molestus*, *odiosus*, etc. With *in* (later, with *ad*) it is almost a synonym of *frequens*. Sometimes, especially in the poets, it is used adverbially, as an equivalent to *saepe*, just as *nullus* = "not at all, never." Where the connotation is one of excessive activity, the renderings "busybody, prattler" often fit. (See *TLL* 8.1609.30 ff.)

⁶Although the word *discumbere* is not inherently sexual (see above), and it certainly heightens the surprise introduced by *et pathicus* if no sexual language has been encountered before, nevertheless the fellow-guest may well apprehend the possibility of actual sexual advances from Naso if he should happen to recline beside him at table—in addition to the general antipathy aroused by Naso's moral reputation.

⁷It is partly this search for a certain kind of antithesis that has driven some modern critics to strive to attach an unjustifiably laudatory sense to *multus* (see above, n. 5).

⁸This note was substantially included in a paper on Catullus read to the Classical Association of Canada at its annual meeting in May 1988.