

## CATULLUS' CRITICISM OF CICERO IN POEM 49

W. JEFFREY TATUM  
*Florida State University*

Disertissime Romuli nepotum,  
quot sunt quotque fuere, Marce Tulli,  
quotque post aliis erunt in annis,  
gratias tibi maximas Catullus  
agit pessimus omnium poeta,  
tanto pessimus omnium poeta,  
quanto tu optimus omnium patronus.

Catullus 49 has long attracted the interest of scholars, and its seven hendecasyllabic lines have inspired a bibliography out of all proportion to the literary merits of the poem.<sup>1</sup> The reason for this curiosity is clear enough: Catullus addresses Cicero and, as one recent critic observes, "it is the sole communication between these great men which has been preserved or even attested to us."<sup>2</sup> A glimpse—or rather the hope for a glimpse—at the relationship between two of the first century's leading literary men is an undeniable enticement; that the piece is fascinating, however, is the only point regarding this poem on which classicists are agreed. Otherwise the history of its scholarship is a record of disagreements. The poem's tone, whether it is sincere or ironic, is contested, and very various occasions for the poet's grateful gesture toward the orator have been postulated. All in all, Catullus 49 remains a puzzle.

The common approach to this poem has been to reconstruct on the basis of what is known of Catullus' life and its points of contact with Cicero's a specific occasion for the piece's composition. Now while it is possible that Catullus 49 is a genuinely occasional poem whose correct interpretation depends upon the reader's familiarity with a specific circumstance, a possibility which cannot be ignored in view of our ignorance as to the actual editor of the corpus and the principles which guided his selection of material,<sup>3</sup> the likelihood is greater that the personal manner of the poem's presentation reflects the common

<sup>1</sup> An excellent survey of the more prominent studies is provided by E. A. Fredricksmeyer, "Catullus 49, Cicero, and Caesar," *CP* 68 (1973) 268–78. See as well J. P. Holoka, *Gaius Valerius Catullus: a Systematic Bibliography* (New York 1985) 192–94.

<sup>2</sup> Fredricksmeyer (above, note 1) 268. But see now T. P. Wiseman, *Catullus and his World: a Reappraisal* (Cambridge 1985) 188ff. for an attempt to resuscitate the theory that the *nostrum Valerium* of Cic. *Fam* 7.11.3 is Catullus.

<sup>3</sup> Because I remain unconvinced that Catullus is responsible for the arrangement of our collection, I have not considered Poem 49 in terms of that more general context. One so inclined may refer to M. B. Skinner, *Catullus' Passer: the Arrangement of the Book of Polymetric Poems* (New York 1981).

tendency among Roman poets to impart to their work an autographical bearing.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is somewhat remarkable, given the prevailing climate of literary criticism, that the standard approach to this poem has been so relentlessly biographical. After all, the thanks which Catullus offers to Cicero do not necessarily imply a *reason* for giving thanks; only a particular posture on the part of the poet is implied, that of a grateful *cliens* addressing his *patronus*. Which brings us to the point of this paper.

But first we must consider the poem's tone. Regardless of how one takes lines one through four,<sup>5</sup> there can be no question that line five is ironic, since Catullus hardly considered himself the worst of all poets. Elsewhere in the Catullan corpus the phrase *pessimus poeta* is used exclusively as a term of abuse and disapprobation.<sup>6</sup> It avails nothing to compare the modesty of Poem 1, which is a mannerism advertising Catullus' Callimachean affiliation. There the poet's humility is balanced by his praise of Nepos, who has the requisite learning and taste to appreciate properly Catullus' *nugae*;<sup>7</sup> no such indirect boasting can be detected in Poem 49, nor have I seen anything to counter O. Weinreich's claim that the reader who takes Poem 49 as sincere must also believe that Catullus truly thought himself *pessimus omnium poeta*.<sup>8</sup> The irony of line five is stressed by repetition, and the correlative structure of lines six and seven employs the irony of *pessimus omnium poeta* to undercut Cicero's epithet *optimus omnium patronus*.<sup>9</sup> Although critics have often noticed the ambiguity of the last line, where *omnium* may be construed either as a partitive or an objective genitive, two factors militate against attaching much importance to this:<sup>10</sup> first, the careful parallelism of six and seven urges us to read *omnium* with the same sense in both lines, and, second, to be known as every man's patron does not appear to be an insult. Aulus Caecina, in an often cited letter to Cicero (*Fam* 6.7.4), praises the orator as *omnium patronus*. It is the poem's undercutting irony, not a possible ambiguity in *omnium*, which poses the real question: what does it mean to dash Cicero's praise by demolishing his characterization as *optimus omnium patronus*?

<sup>4</sup> G. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford 1968) 35, 525ff.; J. E. G. Zetzel, "The Poetics of Patronage in the Late First Century B.C.," in B. K. Gold (ed), *Literary and Artistic Patronage in Ancient Rome* (Austin 1982) 87–102; C. Macleod, "Parody and Personality in Catullus," *CQ* 23 (1973) 294–303.

<sup>5</sup> Several respectable objections have been raised to certain aspects of the irony which has been detected in the first four lines of the poem. See A. Baehrens, *Catulli Veronensis Liber* (Leipzig 1885) 250–3; R. Ellis, *A Commentary on Catullus*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford 1889) 169–70; W. Kroll, *C. Valerius Catullus*<sup>5</sup> (Stuttgart 1968) 88–89; Fredricksmeyer (above, note 1).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Cat 14A.23; 36.6.

<sup>7</sup> D. Singleton, "A Note on Catullus' First Poem," *CP* 67 (1972) 192–96.

<sup>8</sup> O. Weinreich, *Die Distichen des Catull* (Tübingen 1926) 19.

<sup>9</sup> Ellis (above, note 5) 171 compares the criticism of Choerilus preserved by Festus (495.6 Lindsay): "quam malus Homerus tam bonus Choerilus poeta est."

<sup>10</sup> Ellis (above, note 5) 171.

The phrase immediately suggests technical expertise. The adjective *optimus* can indicate perfection with respect to some skill and oratory is among the skills whose mastery can be thus described.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the phrase recalls *disertissime*, the opening word of the poem, and the focus of the poet's praise (whether the hyperbole of that praise is ironic or not) in the opening lines.<sup>12</sup> Yet, and this is important, the phrase also carries connotations of social excellence: as is well-known, the superlative *optimus*, like the Greek *aristos*, possesses social and moral dimensions, as Hellegouarc'h has demonstrated in abundance.<sup>13</sup> Already in the plays of Plautus, and continually throughout the Republic, as Hellegouarc'h puts it, "l'optimus est un personnage de la bonne société, étant sous-entendu qu'il possède de ce fait les plus grandes qualités."<sup>14</sup> In fact the social significance of *optimus* is what underpins its political usage.<sup>15</sup>

It has often struck readers of 49 as noteworthy that *patronus* is the word chosen in this poem to compliment Cicero's oratory.<sup>16</sup> Reference to a single passage in the *Brutus* has prompted the view that Cicero did not associate the term *patronus* with oratorical excellence, and so Catullus' choice of expression has been taken as a slight upon Cicero's rhetorical abilities.<sup>17</sup> This misses the point. At *Brutus* 332 Cicero remarks to the title character:

Brute ... contine te in tuis perenibus studiis et effice id quod iam prope modum vel plane potius effeceras, ut te eripias ex ea quam ego congeSSI in hunc sermonem turba patronorum. nec enim dicet te ornatum uberrimis artibus numerari in vulgo patronorum.

Here Cicero means to incite Brutus to excellence by the assertion that the singular preeminence of a Crassus or Hortensius (or even a Cicero) is within his reach (if the political situation should ever again admit of genuine oratorical accomplishment). The phrases *turba patronorum* and *vulgo patronorum*, like *maioris partis oratorum* which follows them in a subsequent sentence,<sup>18</sup> are intended to highlight the distinction of the *unus excellens*,<sup>19</sup> not to denigrate the eloquence of the speakers whom Cicero has catalogued in his treatise. Both *turba* and *vulgus*, with their low social connotation, are juxtaposed with the loftier *patronus* for sharp effect; the oxymoron underscores the compliment to Brutus.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Plaut *Bacch* 981: *optumus sum orator*.

<sup>12</sup> There is nothing pejorative in Catullus' choice of the word *disertissimus* in line one. Cf. Baehrens (above, note 5) *ad loc*.

<sup>13</sup> J. Hellegouarc'h, *Le vocabulaire latin des relations et des partis politiques sous la république* (Paris 1963) 496f.

<sup>14</sup> Hellegouarc'h (above, note 13) 496.

<sup>15</sup> D. C. Earl, *The Moral and Political Tradition of Rome* (Ithaca 1967) 16.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Ellis (above, note 10) 171.

<sup>17</sup> A recent example is H. P. Syndikus, *Catull: eine Interpretation* (Darmstadt 1984) 249.

<sup>18</sup> *Brutus* 332: "quid illa vetus Academia atque eius heres Aristus hospes et familiaris meus, si quidem similes maioris partis oratorum futuri sumus?"

<sup>19</sup> *Brutus* 333: "Galba fuit inter tot aequalis unus excellens..."

In the *Brutus* Cicero always employs *patronus* discriminatingly.<sup>20</sup> At *Brutus* 226, for example P. Antistius (tr. pl. 88) is dubbed *rabula*, though his rhetorical success, Cicero points out, exceeded that of C. Carbo (tr. pl. 90) or Cn. Pomponius (tr. pl. 90), both of whom, like the eloquent P. Sulpicius (tr. pl. 88), C. Cotta (cos 75), and C. Scribonius Curio (cos 76), are named by Cicero as *patroni*. The Antistii were not prominent and Publius, Cicero stresses, suffered a poor start. Similarly, the equestrian orators whom Cicero recalls, M. Pontidius<sup>21</sup>, P. Cominius and T. Accius<sup>22</sup>, also fail to receive the distinguished appellation, though it was not out of the question for an eques to be called *patronus*.<sup>23</sup> In short, as Gelzer has observed, "the title *patronus* is bestowed by Cicero in the *Brutus* only on men of distinction."<sup>24</sup>

The word "patron" is much, perhaps overmuch, invoked in modern Roman studies, but one need not endorse specific contemporary theories of patronage or *clientela* to allow *patronus* to mean what it means.<sup>25</sup> Whatever distinctions are to be made between the general Roman notion of patronage and the patronage of the law courts, there was none at the linguistic level;<sup>26</sup> for this reason very rich and noble Romans hated to be called clients when they were compelled to seek an advocate.<sup>27</sup> They, of course, preferred the expression *amicus*, not in order to lighten their debt of *gratia*, but so as not to be cast into the role of a *cliens* with its unsavory connotations of social inferiority. Amongst the elite of Rome forensic *patrocinium* was an important means to social and therefore political success, a point often made by modern scholars and a fact of life to which Q. Cicero, if he be the author of the *Commentariolum Petitionis*, vigorously drew his brother's attention.<sup>28</sup> That Catullus meant for us to comprehend the social dimensions of *optimus patronus*, which seem inescapable in any case, is further evidenced by *Marce Tulli* in line two; this salutation, as commentators have

<sup>20</sup> What follows depends upon the observations of M. Gelzer, *Die Nobilität der römischen Republik* (1912) tr. by R. Seager as *The Roman Nobility* (Oxford 1969) 70–71.

<sup>21</sup> *Brutus* 246.

<sup>22</sup> *Brutus* 271.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., 2 *Verr.* 74–75. It should be noticed that Q. Minucius, the *eques* so designated, was a man of considerable distinction: "on ne peut douter que Q. Minucius ne soit, parmi les chevaliers, un des plus hauts placés" (C. Nicloet, *L'Ordre équestre à l'époque républicaine* [312–43 av. J.-C.] vol. 2 [Paris 1974] 954).

<sup>24</sup> Gelzer (above, note 20) 71.

<sup>25</sup> A concise and still useful description of *patrocinium* may be found in E. Badian, *Foreign Clientelae* (264–70 B.C.) (Oxford 1958) 1–11. A very extensive investigation is provided by R. P. Saller, *Personal Patronage under the Early Empire* (Cambridge 1982).

<sup>26</sup> The assertion that by the end of the republic and in the early empire *patronus* was limited to the designation of former masters of freedmen and advocates in court (e.g. P. White, *JRS* 68 [1978] 79, who provides earlier bibliography) is refuted by Saller (above, note 25) 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Cic. Off.* 2.69. See Gelzer (above, note 20) 71–86 for a general discussion of patronage in Roman courts.

<sup>28</sup> *Comm. Pet.* 2–6.

noted, does not belong to colloquial discourse, but represents the ceremonial address of senatorial deliberation.<sup>29</sup> Cicero's use of *patronus* in the *Brutus* reveals how intimately the term is bound to illustrious senatorial society, and Catullus' usage is consistent with that pattern. An *optimus patronus*, then, is a masterful advocate who occupies an exalted position in Roman society—a position associated with high birth, as *optimus* suggests—and Poem 49 heralds Cicero as the best of all.

This honorific speaks directly to Cicero's aspirations. Cicero sought such praise and glory from the start of his career, setting out *flagrans studio laudis*, as he proclaimed to his fellow Romans.<sup>30</sup> New men naturally crave praise, for *laus* is the special prerogative of the *optimus*.<sup>31</sup> In his speeches Cicero proudly declares that he has achieved the status sought by the most noble men,<sup>32</sup> and in his treatises he stresses the value of oratory, especially the pleading of the defense attorney, in acquiring *gloria et gratia*.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, an expression of *gratias maximas* to Cicero, the *optimus omnium patronus*, is most well chosen, and its appropriateness would instantly be recognized by all Catullus' readers, who, even if not *au fait* with Cicero's private views, would know his public statements and boasts. Public figures, after all, have popular images which commonly emphasize their most striking traits; Cicero's diligence at the bar, his wonderful success and its role in fulfilling his much vaunted ambitions cannot fail to be deemed among his outstanding characteristics. Yet this flattery, so suitable and so dear to Cicero, is nonetheless gainsaid by Catullus' irony, and so, by implication, are Cicero's pretensions.

The disdain and resentment which the nobles of Rome felt toward the knight from Arpinum is well-known. Cicero himself bemoans (and rationalizes) their prejudice in his private correspondence.<sup>34</sup> Yet he continued to hear himself abused in the Senate<sup>35</sup> and in the courts.<sup>36</sup> And Cicero's own remarks in the *Pro Sulla* reveal how sorely he had been stung by enemies who attacked him as the third foreign king of Rome.<sup>37</sup> Aristocratic contempt for the *inquinis civis* was common, and little wonder: Romans, especially Romans at the top, hated social climbers, and, as Horace knew, to enter politics was to invite abuse from

<sup>29</sup> Cic. *Att.* 7.3.5; 7.7.7; *Catil.* 1.27; *Mil.* 94. Cf. Pliny *NH* 7.116.

<sup>30</sup> Cic. *Scaur* fr. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Cic. *Sest.* 139; *Vat.* 8; *Phil.* 2.115.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Cic. *Mur.* 17; *Planc.* 18; *Phil.* 6.17.

<sup>33</sup> Cic. *Off.* 2.48, 51, 66.

<sup>34</sup> Cic. *Fam.* 1.7.8.

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Cic. *Att.* 1.16.10.

<sup>36</sup> Cic. *Planc.* 58.

<sup>37</sup> Cic. *Sul.* 21–25. L. Manlius Torquatus, son of the consul for 65, insulted Cicero as “peregrinus rex” (*Sul.* 22). Cicero was frequently called tyrant by *popularis* politicians; *rex* and *regnum* were more commonly hurled by establishment figures (see Hellegouarc’h [above, note 13] 560–61). The imputation of foreign origin, however, was a smear possessing universal appeal among Roman politicians.

all sides.<sup>38</sup> Catullus, whatever his own political aspirations<sup>39</sup>, clearly felt free to lambaste whomsoever he chose for whatever lapse of taste offended him. Any politician was a potential target, and Catullus was especially keen to lampoon arrivistes in Roman politics, of whom Arrius and Mamurra are the best known victims. Catullus' witty animadversion on Cicero's pretensions falls easily into this category of *vers de société*.<sup>40</sup> By portraying himself as a grateful, abject *cliens*, only to overthrow the masquerade, Catullus flouts the public image which Cicero had labored so assiduously to acquire and maintain.

If this reading is sound, it nonetheless fails to satisfy the yearning which has motivated so much critical interest in the piece. No positive ground has been gained in determining the actual nature of Catullus' acquaintance and relationship with Cicero, though it is difficult to imagine this poem as the creation of a close friend. Catullus need never have met Cicero to have written Poem 49. An ironic *actio gratiarum* was an elegant means of needling the famous lawyer, and it may well be that Catullus' grateful posture is an artistic fiction generated solely by the term *patronus*, on which word the poem concentrates its principal sting.<sup>41</sup> We may fantasize about whatever commerce actually existed between these two fascinating men, but to draw specific conclusions from this poem is to go beyond the evidence. Nevertheless, it requires no privileged information to discern that the obvious and emphatic irony of lines five and six transforms the last line of the poem into a subtle, urbane taunt which mocks Cicero's political and social pretensions. These seven hendecasyllables will have found a receptive and appreciative audience in Roman high society—at any rate in Catullus' circle.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> A point he hammers home in *Satire* 1.6 (esp. lines 20–37).

<sup>39</sup> On which topic see recently H. P. Syndikus, "Catull und die Politik," *Gymnasium* 93 (1986) 34–47.

<sup>40</sup> K. Quinn, *Catullus: an Interpretation* (London 1972) 268 is quite correct to include Poem 49 in Catullus' "poetry of social comment." That a provincial should attack the pretensions of another provincial ought to occasion no surprise: Cicero himself, in his invective against Calpurnius Piso (cos. 58), frequently ridiculed that noble Roman's Gallic ancestry (Catullus' criticism of Cicero, of course, involves no specifics in the way that Cicero's criticism of Piso does). See the useful discussion in R. G. M. Nisbet, *M. Tulli Ciceronis in L. Calpurnium Pisonem Oratio* (Oxford 1961) 192–97.

<sup>41</sup> Formal expression of thanks was of course a common feature both of oratory and poetry during the empire; see F. Cairns, *Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry* (Edinburgh 1972) 74, with further citations.

<sup>42</sup> I am grateful to M. Gwyn Morgan, whose conversations with me on the topic of this paper have improved it considerably. This is not to say that he shares my views.