CATULLUS AND CALLIMACHUS ON LARGE WOMEN

(A reconsideration of c. 86)

BY

T.D. PAPANGHELIS

Catullus concedes that the Quintia of c.86 is fair-complexioned (candida), tall (longa) and upright (recta)¹. Any poetic mistress worth her salt might be expected to possess those qualities²), and Proper-tius in particular offers detailed portraits of his mistress in compara-ble terms: one at 2,2,5 ff., where fulva coma est longaeque manus, et maxima tota / corpore, et incedit vel Iove digna soror (5-6) is followed by no less than three mythological illustrations designed to monumen-talise the lady's stately figure and movement (7-12); the other, at 2,3,9 ff., is interesting for its highly pictorial illustration of the milk-and-roses hue conveyed by candida (9-12). And yet, Catullus risks going out on a limb by grudging Quintia the praise bestowed on her by most people, namely that of being formosa tout court (totum illud formosa nego).

The reason is that, large woman though she is, she lacks venustas and sal: nam nulla venustas, / nulla in tam magno est corpore mica salis (3-4). These terms, like their corresponding adjectives venustus and sal-sus, and like lepidus, facetus, delicatus, bellus, iucundus, dicax, are con-spicuous in the vocabulary of Comedy, but Catullus and his Neoteric confrères seem to have bandied them about as catchwords meant to suggest a distinctly novel attitude to either life or literature

¹) D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Propertiana (Cambridge 1956, repr. Amsterdam 1967), 98 takes recta in Prop. 2, 18, 25 (ut natura dedit, sic omnis recta figura est) and other comparable cases, among which Cat. 86, 1, to mean 'proper, handsome' and regards this "as a colloquial development of the sense '"straight, upstanding' ".

²) See Fordyce on 86,1 f. and K. Quinn, Latin Explorations (London 1963), 66-7.
or both\textsuperscript{3}). They can be used to brand Asinius Marrucinus who has made a habit of pilfering napkins at drinking-parties: \textit{hoc salsum esse putas? fugit te, inepte: / quamvis sordida res et invenusta est} (12, 4-5); they may refer to purely poetic qualities, as in 16, 7, \textit{qui tum denique habent salem ac leporem} (of his own kind of verse); or they can be deployed to set out the paradoxical case-history of Suffenus in c. 22, who, \textit{venustus et dixax et urbanus} though he is as a person (2), becomes, quite surprisingly, \textit{infacetio infacietior rure} (14), the moment he turns his hand to poetry. Such terms do not easily lend themselves to clear-cut distinctions. Intimations of charm, sophisticated affability, refined sensualness, sense of occasion and proportion, ironical wit and fine discrimination inhere in each one of them. In 22,2 the three qualities ascribed to Suffenus obviously overlap, and it is for a purely cumulative effect rather than because he attends to oversubtle distinctions that the poet strings them together. Having said this, I think that between \textit{venustas-venustus} and \textit{sal-salsus} there is a fairly perceptible difference of range and precision. Whereas the former is in most cases something of a blanket term which can generally be rendered as ‘charm-charming’, the latter is more focused and connotes ‘sparkle’, wit or a taste for sophisticated waggishness, whether in word or deed\textsuperscript{4}). In this sense, \textit{sal} is an ingredient of \textit{venustas}.

It is my view that, despite the informed interest it has attracted in scholarly notes and discussions\textsuperscript{5}), the more comprehensive of these two Catullan terms still leaves room for profitable speculation. In what follows we examine the evidence of three Catullan poems, along with a couple of passages from other sources, in order to bring out some specific associations which may attach to this poet’s use of \textit{venustas} but have not so far received proper attention.


\textsuperscript{4} Apart from 12,4 and 16,7 above, see 13,5.