Writing for an As. Catullus 50.3-4

Catullus 50.1-6 (Mynors 1958):

Hesterno, Licini, die otiosi
mul tum lusimus in meis tabellis,
ut conuenerat esse delicatos:
scribens uersiculos uterque nostrum
ludebat numero modo hoc modo illoc,
reddens mutua per iocum atque uinum.

Catullus 50 is an interesting object of study; its interpretation is far from clear. The significance of the poem for the Catullan poetics and literary programme has rightly been acknowledged,¹ but questions about the unity of the whole poem as well as its relationship to the neighbouring poems in the Catullan collection, cc. 49 and 51, remain unresolved.² This paper will look at the beginning of the poem, where we are, as the text stands, confronted with rather awkward Latin in lines 2-5: *mul tum lusimus in meis tabellis, / ut conuenerat esse delicatos: / scribens uersiculos uterque nostrum / ludebat.*

The main problem seems to lie in 50.3, with *ut conuenerat esse delicatos,* and the syntactically abrupt change to 50.4. Mynors tries to make sense of it by punctuating strongly with a colon at the end of 50.3. I hold that a better solution can be found in replacing *esse;* something substantival seems to be required that can go naturally with *ut conuenerat* (and *scribens*).

I suggest the ablative pretii *asse,* paleographically a most easy change. The ablative of price of *as* is very natural, also in the Catullan corpus (cf. *asse uenditare,* 33.8). The *as* itself is a well-known quantity in the Catullan world,

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² Stephen Heyworth argues for a lacuna (or even a poem break) after v. 17: Harrison & Heyworth 1998, 98. Wray (2001, 95-100) and Acosta-Hughes (2010) argue that c. 50 accompanies c. 51 (in the same manner as c. 65 goes with c. 66). This was first suggested in Lavency 1965. But the link between cc. 50 and 51 would be much less explicit than the one between 65 and 66. Buchheit (1976, 179) sees a close link to c. 49: “In c. 49 weist Catull […] Cicero in seine Schranken […]. In c. 50 setzt er der Dichterfreundschaft mit Calvus, dem Rivalen Ciceros, ein Denkmal.”
evidenced in the iambic context at 42.13 (non assis facit?), and in the programmatic kissing poem Catullus 5 (aestimemus assis, 5.3). As in Catullus 5, the direct context in c. 50 is also evocative of the world of transaction and finances: cf. especially reddens mutua in v. 6 (in Thomson's rendering, 'paying each other out', neatly capturing the original financial meaning of the phrase). If one accepts a strong link between poems 50 and 51, one might also want to see the one as of the 'poor' poet as the 'pathological reality' of the more abstract version in Catullus 51: miserō (v. 5).

My suggestion involves punctuating after tabellis in v. 3, and not after delicatos in v. 4, as already suggested by Peiper. I understand ut conuenerat asse as a unit, and one could put a comma before delicatos to make this clear. Taking delicatos with uersiculos gives a fitting adjective-noun pair that seems more attractive than the somewhat awkward construction in the transmitted reading: it is not for nothing that conuenerat esse delicatos has exercised scholars (cf. Puccius' delicatis). The hyperbaton with enjambment in my suggestion (delicatos / scribens uersiculos) is not unusual in Catullus, a poet whose predilection for hyperbaton has been acknowledged: especially the practice in the carmina maiores, imitative of Hellenistic precedent, breaks new ground for the spread of the phenomenon in Latin poetry. But also in a more 'conversational' context such as c. 50, hyperbaton over a line-break conforms with Catullan practice, as the hendecasyllabic 6.10-11 (attritus, tremulique quassae lecti / argutatio inambulatioque) and 53.2-3 (qui, cum mirifice Vatiniana / meus...)

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3 Note that this as also occurs together with Catullus' writing tablets, the codicilli at 42.11 and 12, the equivalent of the tabellae at 50.2.
4 On Catullus 'financial attitudes' see Wiseman 1985, 101-107, esp. 104 on Catullus 5.
5 Thomson 1997, 325. In c. 5, cf. esp. mília multa fecerimus (5.10) and conturbare (5.11), with Kroll 1989, ad loc. One should also not overlook the erotic theme of the two poems. The erotic aspects of c. 50 ("frivolous atmosphere", Segal 1970, 27) have been interpreted as a "parody of love-poetry" (Macleod 1973, 294). Segal 1970, 28 makes the link between Catullus 5 and 50.
6 On c. 50 as the 'pathological reality' of c. 51 see Acosta-Hughes 2010.
7 Peiper 1875, 30.
8 Already Muretus 1554, 56 takes the transmitted ut conuenerat esse as a unit (but wants to understand esse in the sense of cibum capere). A stop of some sort after the seventh element of the hendecasyllabus is not unusual in Catullus: cf., by way of example, Catullus 5.11, 7.7, 9-7, etc.