CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Dismembering Cominius: Political Violence and Iambic Aggression in Catullus 108

Robert Cowan 🔟

The University of Sydney
Email: bob.cowan@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

Carmen 108 is one of the most neglected and unloved in the Catullan corpus. When it is mentioned in scholarship, it is either as a distastefully extreme instance of iambic invective or the object of a prosopographical exercise in identifying the addressee, Cominius. Gnilka alone has tried to situate it in the context of late Republican political violence, in particularly public lynching. Instead of isolating these two aspects of the poem from each other, this article argues that *c.* 108 is a self-conscious exploration of the interaction between poetic form and *hors-texte*. The terms of the invective situate it firmly within the tradition of Archilochean and Hipponactean iambos and it may even allude directly to a fragment of the latter. Yet the threats of violence are transformed when recontextualized within the world of the late Republic, where such literary violence was very much a reality. The poem performs a symbolic dismemberment of Cominius' body, but one that cannot be safely separated from acts of mob violence in the period. The pragmatics of Catullan iambos explores the limits of verbal violence as speech-act and the point at which hate-speech becomes indistinguishable from the violence it incites.

Reading Cominius: The 'Why Bother?' Question

Catullus 108 is an unloved and unlovely poem. Syndikus begins his analysis of it by referring to 'the verses that initially are only repulsive', but, though he grudgingly acknowledges that Catullus does not lack a sense of artistry in treating his disgusting theme, there is little sign that he is any less repulsed by the end of his reading.[1] It is not hard to see why so many critics react to the poem in this way or, more often, ignore it altogether.

---

[1] Syndikus (1987) 121, 123.

Si, Comini, populi arbitrio tua cana senectus
    spurcata impuris moribus intereat,
non equidem dubito quin primum inimica bonorum
        lingua exsecta auido sit data uulturio,
effossos oculos uoret atro gutture coruus,
        intestina canes, cetera membra lupi.

<div align="right">Catull. 108</div>

If, Cominius, by the judgement of the people, your grey old age,
        befouled by unclean morals, were to die,
I for one do not doubt that first, that enemy of the good,
        your tongue would be cut out and given to a voracious vulture,
a crow with black throat would dig out and gulp down your eyes,
        dogs your guts, your other limbs wolves.[2]

The gruesomeness of its details, the elusiveness of its target's identity, and the apparent absence of the erotic and metapoetic subject matter that dominate Catullan scholarship have doubtless contributed to its neglect. Only one article has been devoted to the poem, almost fifty years ago, and it is mentioned only in passing in the many monographs and articles on Catullus.[3]

Nevertheless, it is a fascinating poem. It is simultaneously characteristic of the Catullan corpus and anomalous within it. Its aggressive tone and invective content can be paralleled by many of the polymetrics and epigrams, but its imagining of its target's death is unique in the corpus, which elsewhere limits itself to verbal humiliation or non-lethal, generally sexual violence. The singling out of an individual for a moral or social transgression is common in Catullus, but the transgression, be it incest or body-odour, is elsewhere generally identified explicitly rather than hinted at through vague references to 'unclean morals'. Moreover, the criteria by which such transgressions are adjudged transgressive and punishable are usually determined by Catullus' own narrow clique of self-appointed social and cultural mandarins, whereas Cominius is to be condemned by the *populi arbitrium*.

All these elements are related to the poem's literary context within the tradition of iambos, its historical context in the political violence of the late Republic, and the complex relationship between the two. Du Quesnay and Woodman have made the case for a third way between arid formalism and naïve biographical interpretations. Citing Plutarch and Cicero's testimony for Cato's Archilochean iamboi against Metellus Scipio and Trebonius' Lucilian satires against Antony, they argue that 'real feelings are self-consciously expressed in poems which work in a defined literary tradition adapted to

---

[2] The text of Catullus is Mynors (1958), of Hipponax Degani (1991), of Horace Shackleton Bailey (2008), of Ovid Owen (1915), of Asconius Lewis (2006), of Florus Malcovati (1972). All translations, of ancient texts and modern scholarship, are my own.

[3] Gnilka (1973). Hartz (2007) 160–1 is the most extensive other discussion, running to one and a half pages.

the realities of the moment.'[4] Their course takes them closer to biography than to formalism, and the definition and the recoverability of 'real feelings' are at best problematic. Nevertheless, the connection and adaptation of literary tradition to 'the realities of the moment' remains an extremely useful concept for the interpretation of Catullus.

Catullus' self-construction as an iambist in the tradition of Archilochus and Hipponax has increasingly been recognized as central to his poetic project, set alongside, and perhaps in tension with, a Callimachean code model.[5] Many of its characteristic features made the literary tradition of iambos particularly well-suited to being adapted to the realities of the political moment in late Republican Rome: the aggression that was its defining characteristic; its blaming and shaming of individuals; the physical violence that was frequently threatened and even more frequently inscribed in iambos' status as almost an illocutionary speech act.[6] Catullus takes the iambic aggression he has inherited from the tradition and adapts it to the political violence of his times. In *c.* 108, he takes this equation to its limits, moving beyond threats of rhaphanidosis, as in *c.* 15, to the deadly force that was such a feature of the 50s BCE. It is not only the verbal and physical violence that is taken to its limits, but the degree of equation between the two. Catullus explores how political violence does not merely match iambos' traditional content but can be expressed, symbolized, and even enacted by its style. The result is an unlovely poem indeed, but an important one.

Versifying Cominius: The Generic Question

C. 108 is unquestionably invective, but is it necessarily iambic? The definition of iambos is fraught and there is ongoing debate about the relative importance of metre, content, and stylistic register. Catullus' explicit references to iamboi, one of them clearly evoking Archilochus, all occur in hendecasyllabic poems, as does his other most marked allusion to the great Parian iambist.[7] Although the notion of iambos in elegiacs stretches the playful manipulation of metre and genre still further, Heyworth notes Archilochean echoes in the Gellius cycle and at 65.3–4 and 68.10.[8] Ovid's elegiac *Ibis* simultaneously and disingenuously declares its own anomalous status as an iambos in the 'wrong metre' and draws attention to the appropriateness of that metre.[9] Metre is no obstacle to the identification of *c.* 108 as an iambos.

---

[4] Du Quesnay and Woodman (2012) 258, citing Plut. *Cat. Min.* 7.1–2 and Cic. *Fam.* 12.16.3. On Cato's iamboi and Catull. 54: R. Cowan (2015).

[5] Catullus and iambos: Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.93, Koster (1980) 282–93, Newman (1990) 43–74, Heyworth (2001), Holzberg (2002) 46–8, Tatum (2007), Lennartz (2010) 627–50, Lavigne (2010), Hutchinson (2012) 75–8, Ingleheart (2014), R. Cowan (2015), Hawkins (2018), (2019). Archilochean and Callimachean code models: Wray (2001) 161–216.

[6] On the 'idea' of iambos: Lennartz (2010), Rotstein (2010), Hawkins (2014), R. Cowan (2015).

[7] Explicit references: 36.5, 40.2 (evoking Archil. fr. 172 West), 54.6, fr. 3.1. Other allusion: 56 and Archil. fr. 168 West. On these poems: Heyworth (2001) 125–30.

[8] Heyworth (2001) 137–9. Cf. Newman (1990) 133–7 and Lennartz (2010) 636–8 on *c.* 116.

[9] *prima quidem coepto committam proelia uersu, / non soleant quamuis hoc pede bella geri.* Ov. *Ib.* 43–4, with Degl'Innocenti Pierini (2003) 138–42, Schiesaro (2011) 89–95, Krasne (2012) 35–6, Hawkins (2014) 41–2.

The *Ibis* also offers strong positive encouragement to regard *c.* 108 as iambos, since both it and Horace's fifth *Epode*, two unambiguous examples of the genre, contain curses-cum-prophecies so strikingly similar that they could even be considered allusions. *Epode* 5 ends with the boy kidnapped by witches transformed from a pitiful figure pleading for mercy into 'an almost inhuman force of vengeance' (Mankin (1995) 109). It climaxes with a prophecy of communal execution and dismemberment by birds and beasts:

> uos turba uicatim hinc et hinc saxis petens
>   contundet obscenas anus,
> post insepulta membra different lupi
>   et Esquilinae alites,
> neque hoc parentes, heu, mihi superstites
>   effugerit spectaculum.

<div align="right">Hor. Epod. 5.97–102</div>

> As for you, the mob, street by street, from here and from here, attacking
>   with stones,
>   will pulverize you polluted old women,
> afterwards your unburied limbs wolves will scatter
>   and Esquiline birds,
> nor will this elude my parents, alas, surviving me,
>   as a spectacle.

The parallels with *c.* 108 are clear. The ambiguity of Catullus' *populi arbitrium* is resolved here with an unequivocal description of mob violence (*turba*), but one that retains an awkward balance between unofficial legitimacy and transparent anarchy. Stoning partakes of both qualities, a collective expression of the community's will, but also one that stands in opposition to the official sanctions of the law. Even *uicatim*, 'street by street', simultaneously evokes two antithetical images. The reader sees the common people organized according to their civic divisions, analogous to arranging them *centuriatim* or *tributim*, and indeed *uici* were the divisions used by Julius Caesar and Augustus to perform their enumerations of the people.[10] Yet she also sees Clodius enlisting slaves and undesirables into his gangs street by street.[11] Iambos' oscillation between communal justice and mob anarchy is very much to the fore. Dismemberment is also predicted here and the specific animals that will perform it: wolves (though no dogs) and 'the carrion crows and vultures' as which

---

[10] *recensum populi nec more nec loco solito, sed uicatim per dominos insularum egit,* Suet. *Iul.* 41.3; *populi recensum uicatim egit,* Suet. *Aug.* 40.2.

[11] *ille uel ante demens ruere, post hunc uero furorem nihil nisi caedem inimicorum cogitare, uicatim ambire, seruis aperte spem libertatis ostendere.* Cic. *Att* 4.3.2 = SB 75; *isdemque consulibus inspectantibus seruorum dilectus habebatur pro tribunali Aurelio nomine collegiorum, cum uicatim homines conscriberentur, decuriarentur, ad uim, ad manus, ad caedem, ad direptionem incitarentur.* Cic. *Sest.* 34. Kaster (2006) ad loc. notes that of the latter that 'the metaphors [sc. *dilectus, conscribere, decuriare*] primarily suggest an outrageous parody of a proper military levy conducted in the consuls' presence' so it is possible that *uicatim* is a similar parody of *centuriatim*.

Watson ([2003](), ad loc.) identifies the *Esquilinae alites*. The iambic quality of a passage from the *Epodes*, or at least from the first eight poems, hardly needs justification, but the boy's second speech is particularly iambic. It begins with an allusion to Archilochus and ends with one to Hipponax, and its illocutionary performance of violence upon its targets establishes the boy as an iambist within the iambos.[12]

The key passage from the *Ibis* also predicts – with the force of a curse and threat – the denial of burial and dismemberment by birds and beasts:

> nec tibi continget funus lacrimaeque tuorum;
>   indeploratum proicere caput,
> carnificisque manu populo plaudente traheris,
>   infixusque tuis ossibus uncus erit.
> ipsae te fugient, quae carpunt omnia, flammae:
>   respuet inuisum iusta cadauer humus
> unguibus et rostro tardus trahet ilia uultur,
>   et scindent auidi perfida corda canes.
> deque tuo fiet (licet hac sis laude superbus)
>   insatiabilibus corpore rixa lupis.
>
> <div align="right">Ov. Ib. 161–70</div>

> Nor will a funeral and the tears of your family be granted to you;
>   you will be cast out, an unbewailed person/head,
> you will be dragged by the hand of the executioner, with the people applauding,
>   and his hook will be fixed in your bones.
> The very flames, which devour everything, will flee you:
>   justly will the soil spit out your hated corpse
> and with its talons and beak the vulture will slowly drag out your guts,
>   and greedy dogs will rend your faithless heart.
> And over your body there will be (it is permitted for you to be proud of this glory)
>   a brawl for insatiable wolves.

Although the conventional list of animals that mangle unburied bodies was relatively short and standardized, Ovid notably shares with Catullus vultures, dogs, and wolves, in the same order, with only the crow omitted. Like Catullus and the boy in *Epode* 5, Ovid appeals to the consensus of the community, but with a further variation. Catullus' *populus* offers an ambiguous, quasi-judicial *arbitrium* on Cominius. Horace's *turba* will be explicitly and actively involved in the lynching of the witches. Ovid's *populus* merely expresses its approval by applauding, while the dirty work is performed by their official

---

[12] *fas nefasque,* 5.87 ~ λεωργὰ καὶ θεμιστά, Archil. fr. 177.3 West; *neque hoc... / effugerit spectaculum,* 5. 101–2 ~ ταῦτ᾽ ἐθέλοιμ᾽ ἂν ἰδεῖν, Hippon. fr. 194.15 Degani = 115.15 West (from the Strasbourg Papyrus, assigned by some to Archilochus). On the Strasbourg Epode, Hipponax and curse poetry: Watson ([1991]()) 56–62.

surrogate, the *carnifex*. The phrase *populo plaudente* has an interesting history and *Nachleben*. Ovid is recycling it from his description of the procession of sacrificial animals at the festival of Juno in Falerii, intratextually designating the execution of Ibis as a sacrifice and more specifically as a scapegoat or *pharmakos* corresponding to the Falerian she-goat.[13] Its reception in Petronius, where Eumolpus applies it to beasts eating criminals in the arena, and Prudentius, describing Marius leading Iugurtha in triumph to his execution, indicate that both appreciated Ovid's association of the phrase with the communal approval of the violent execution of a criminal, public enemy, or *pharmakos*.[14]

It is impossible to be certain whether all three of Catullus, Horace, and Ovid are alluding to a specific, shared iambic antecedent or to more general iambic themes of communal violence against a scapegoat.[15] It is also possible that both Horace and Ovid are creatively claiming *c.* 108 as an iambos by imitating its punitive and violent motifs in their own explicitly iambic poems.[16] Ovid may even be marking *c.* 108 as iambic *through* Horace by means of a window allusion. All three share the characteristic iambic quality of 'bitterness' (τὸ πικρόν, *acerbitas*).[17] The element of humour that is often present in the genre is not particularly prominent, though arguments have been made for humour in *Epode* 5 and Ovid's ironic wit is always potentially amusing.[18] The threat and illocutionary enactment of violence is a defining feature of iambos and its reception, most explicitly enshrined in Meleager's description of Archilochus' 'violent iamboi' (ὑβριστῆρας ἰάμβους, *Anth. Pal.* 7.352.7).

There is one distinctively iambic motif that we have seen prominently displayed in all three of *c.* 108, *Epode* 5 and *Ibis* 161–70, but which is notably absent from other Catullan iambos. Heyworth specifically remarks on this absence, though not on its presence in *c.* 108:

> There are important elements of iambos that are missing or very rare in poems 1–60. Some have seen the genre as reinforcing behavioural norms of society by exposing those who break these norms; and Catullus can certainly be read so in that he expects others to show his urge towards *urbanitas*, and the associated qualities such as *uenustas*. But this is hardly ever done with reference to a collective rather than to his own judgment or a single friend.[19]

---

[13] Ov. *Am.* 3.13.13–22, esp. 13 (*populo plaudente*) and 18–12 (the 'punishment' of the she-goat, pelted by boys with javelins).

[14] Petron. *Sat.* 119.18 (from the description of Rome's decadence leading up to the civil war); Prudent. *C. Symm.* 525 (paired with Cicero's execution of Cethegus).

[15] Callimachus' *Ibis* has been a popular candidate, though I shall suggest an alternative below.

[16] Schiesaro (2011) 98 notes Ovid's evocation of Horace (though not Catullus) in these passages but sees them as 'the contamination between iambic poetry, invective and malediction', although invective and malediction are surely fundamental features of iambos rather than rival genres that can be subject to *contaminatio*.

[17] Iambic bitterness: R Cowan (2015) 24–5.

[18] On humour in Catullan and other iambos: R. Cowan (2015). Watson (2003) 190: 'humour is a major ingredient in *Epode* 5'.

[19] Heyworth (2001) 135.

This reference to the collective is precisely what we find in Catullus' reference to the *populi arbitrium* and in its Horatian and Ovidian reception. Skinner (2003: 221 n80) has argued that the later epigrams of the elegiac libellus appeal to the 'collective judgment of the community' and that *c.* 108 forms a climax of this sequence. Her argument rests on Catullus' use of maxims and proverbial phrases in *c.* 93 and 94, which is not the strongest of bases, though it does present the possibility of an interesting further parallel with iambos, which similarly appeals to popular wisdom in the form of gnomai and ainoi.[20] Nevertheless, however one reads the surrounding epigrams, *c.* 108 unambiguously appeals to the 'collective judgment of the community' and does so in the case of someone who has committed transgressions against societal norms that, though vaguely expressed, seem to extend beyond the social *faux pas* targeted in Catullus' other iamboi. By doing so, Catullus is adhering more closely to one of the key generic qualities of archaic iambos. As Brown puts it, '[t]he iambist is a protector of his community and by means of ἴαμβος repels any who threaten the stability of his world.'[21] Even more important than the nature of archaic iambos in its original context is the reception of the idea of iambos. Hawkins (2014: 91) has shown that this conservative ethos prevails in the long post-archaic reception of iambos. By appealing to collective judgment to reinforce traditional values, Catullus evokes the essence of iambos.

Before moving from the 'defined literary tradition' to 'the realities of the moment', and the relationship between the two, it is worth considering whether the appeal to collective judgement in *c.* 108 might evoke not merely iambos in general but a specific poem. To my knowledge, critics have not commented on the striking echo in *c.* 108 of a fragment of Hipponax:

Μοῦσά μοι Εὐρυμεδοντιάδεω τὴν ποντοχάρυβδιν,
τὴν ἐγγαστριμάχαιραν, ὃς ἐσθίει οὐ κατὰ κόσμον,
ἔννεφ', ὅπως ψηφῖδι <κακῆι> κακὸν οἶτον **ὄληται**
βουλῆι δημοσίηι παρὰ θῖν' ἁλὸς ἀτρυγέτοιο.

<div align="right">Hippon. fr. 126 Degani = 128 West</div>

Muse, tell me of Eurymedontiades, the sea-whirlpool,
the gut-knife, who eats not according to order,
so that by an <evil> vote/stoning **he may die** an evil death
by the will of the people beside the shore of the barren sea.

This fragment is preserved by Polemon as evidence that Hipponax was the inventor of epic parody and it is its relationship to Homeric and other epic that has been the main focus of attention.[22] However, scholars including Degani, Faraone, Compton, and Allan have also noted its possible relationship to the *pharmakos* ritual that is more explicitly engaged with elsewhere in

---

[20] Skinner (2003) 113–14; she does not herself refer to iambos. On gnomai and ainoi in iambos: Irwin (1998); Hawkins (2014) 89–93; Brown (2018); Swift (2019) 21, 28–31.

[21] Brown (1997) 42. Cf. Carey (2009) 159–60, (2018) 12–13; Swift (2019) 25–8.

[22] Alexandrou (2016) 39; T. Hawkins (2016) 242; Allan (2019) 218; Kelly (forthcoming).

Hipponax and to incantations for expelling famine demons from the community.[23] In both interpretations, Eurymedontiades is not merely a glutton but a political threat to the community, and one who will devour its substance if he is not eliminated. The resemblance of Hipponax's βουλὴ δημοσίη to Catullus' *populi arbitrium* is remarkably close. While one might expect collocations corresponding to 'the will of the people' to be common, the precise Hipponactean phrase occurs only once elsewhere in extant Greek and is one of very few instances of cognates of βουλή and δῆμος used together to express this notion.[24] This was probably because writers were wary of evoking the common formula ἡ βουλὴ καὶ ὁ δῆμος, but whatever the reason, the result is that Hipponax's βουλὴ δημοσίη stands out as a distinctive and recognizable phrase that Catullus' *docti lectores* could be expected to recognize behind *populi arbitrium*.

Although Archilochus is more frequently discussed as Catullus' iambic code-model, Hipponax's importance as an intertext is being increasingly noted.[25] The strong claim for a direct allusion to Hipponax fr. 126 can certainly be made. In addition to the verbal echo of βουλὴ δημοσίη in *populi arbitrium*, and even of ὄληται in *interat*, the situation evoked is very similar: an enemy of the community is to be killed – unpleasantly – in accordance with the popular will and his body exposed. Even if this claim is not accepted, fr. 126 offers a clear example of an archaic iambic precedent for these key features of *c.* 108. Fr. 126 is not of course in an iambic metre, but its aggressive, violent, moralizing ethos and its Hipponactean authorship strongly align it with that genre.[26] The other important feature that fr. 126 exhibits is the fore-grounding of its own status as explicitly causing and implicitly enacting the violence that it describes. The Muse is bidden to speak (ἔννεφ') in order that (ὅπως) Eurymedontiades may die (ὄληται). Speech causes action and comes to constitute that action in its status as a speech-act, a common feature of iambos.

Reconstructing Cominius: The Prosopographical Question

The 'defined literary tradition' within which *c.* 108 works is that of iambos. The greatest challenge in reconstructing 'the realities of the moment' that the poem reflects is the uncertainty about the identity of its addressee and the actions that provoked Catullus' attack. The manuscripts unanimously offer the nonsensical *sic homini* but, though a few other conjectures have been

---

[23] Degani (1984) 187–225; Guida (1994); Faraone (2004), Compton (2006) 64–5, Allan (2019) 219. *Pharmakoi* elsewhere in Hipponax: frr. 6 and 26–30 Degani = 5–10 West.

[24] The peace treaty imposed on the Aetolians by the Romans includes the clause μηδὲ χορηγείτω μηδὲν δημοσίᾳ βουλῇ ('nor provide any supplies [to an anti-Roman army] by the will of the people', Polyb. 21.32.3). Frustratingly, Livy's version of the treaty (*neue ulla ope iuuato*, 38.11.2) does not render the crucial phrase

[25] Koenen (1977) 73–83 on *c.* 25; Vine (2009) on *c.* 44; Lavigne (2010) on *c.* 8; Hawkins (2012) 348 on *c.* 53.

[26] Allan (2019: 217): 'The poem treats iambic themes ... in grand epic language, creating a comic clash of register between high style and low content.' Cf. West (1974) 70 on its status as iambos.

made, Guarini's 1521 suggestion of *si, Comini* has been universally accepted by subsequent editors and critics.[27] However, this partial solution only poses the further question: who was Cominius?

The *nomen* Cominius, probably most famously held by Postumus, the consul of 501 and commander of the young Coriolanus, occurs a few times in the surviving historical record of the late Republic, including the Sextus gagged and dragged to prison by Verres and the Caesarian Quintus whose ship unfortunately drifted into Scipio's camp at Thapsus.[28] However, as critics routinely observe, the strongest – though still not unproblematic – candidates are the brothers Publius and Gaius (or possibly Lucius) Cominius from Spoletium, who prosecuted L. Aelius Staienus in 74 BCE and C. Cornelius (tr. pl. 67), abortively in 66 and unsuccessfully in 65, when Cicero for the defence delivered the lost *Pro Cornelio*.[29] The events surrounding the case in 66, including the brothers' escape over the rooftops, are vividly described in Asconius' commentary on that speech (Asc. *Corn.* 59–60C). These colourful and dramatic events would certainly fit the image of a man who might be subject to violent revenge *populi arbitrio*, especially since Cornelius' political leanings were markedly *popularis*.[30] In particular, it is worth noting the reference to *duces operarum*, the leaders of the political gangs, especially associated with Clodius in the 50s, whose status stood somewhere between a fully-privatized army of hired thugs and an organized, mobilized form of the existing *populus* and its *collegia*.[31] The ambiguous and ambivalent nature of these gangs and their threats against the Cominii resonates strongly with that of Catullus' *populi arbitrium*, oscillating between the people's sovereign will and the mob's capricious whim.[32] Some suggest C. Cornelius as the addressee of *c.* 102, though there is little basis for this beyond the coincidence of a very common name.[33]

There is much to be said for the identification of the Cominius of *c.* 108 with one of the brothers of Spoletium, but the case is far from conclusive. The decade that had passed between the events of 66–65 and Catullus' *floruit* of the mid-50s makes it harder to imagine the latter's immediate impetus to compose

---

[27] Alongside other suggestions such as *sic horum* and *sic hominum*, Kiss' apparatus at Catullus Online records the following conjectured names: *Sicconi,* Calphurnius 1481; *Siconi,* Ald. 1502; *si Coni,* Avancius 1535*; si Cani,* Ferrari ca. 1530–1586. Only the last of these is attested as a late Republican name (or from any period) and that only of an equestrian tricked into overpaying for a Sicilian villa in an anecdote at Cic. *Off.* 3.58–60 and one who cracked a joke at *De or.* 2.284.

[28] Postumus (Cominius *RE* 16): Cic. *Balb.* 53; *Rep.* 2.57; Liv. 2.18, 1. 33, 3. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 5.50.1, Plut. *Cor.* 8.1; Sextus (Cominius *RE* 14): Cic. *Verr.* 2.4.24; Quintus (Cominius *RE* 13): B*Afr.* 44.1, 46.3. Neudling (1955) 48 mentions this last as a possible candidate.

[29] C. Cominius (*RE* 4); P. Cominius (*RE* 11); L. Cominius (*RE* 8), though the entry acknowledges that the Lucius of Cic. *Clu.* 100 and Gaius of Asc. *Corn.* 59C were almost certainly the same person and probably called Gaius. The identification was first made by Lipsius (*Var. Lect.* 3.5.), most fully discussed and endorsed by Neudling (1955) 48 and cited with varying degrees of scepticism by most commentators.

[30] On Cornelius and his prosecutions: Griffin (1973); Millar (1998) 87–92.

[31] On such gangs: Lintott (1999 [1968]) 74–88, incl. 76 on the Cominii, Mouritsen (2001) 58, 83–4.

[32] Cf. Russell (2016) on Clodius' closing of *tabernae* in 58 to evoke *iustitium* and lay claim to the support of the whole Roman people.

[33] Schwabe (1862); Ellis (1876) 307; Quinn (1970) 447; *contra* Kroll (1922) 279.

his invective, though we know nothing of Cominius' later career prior to his death reported as recent in Cicero's *Brutus* of 46 (271). The modern reader once more lacks the historical details that might have illuminated aspects of one of Catullus' elusive and allusive attacks on a contemporary. We do not know who Cominius was, but the more important and interesting question is whether Catullus' contemporary readers knew who he was, or at least whether the poem's rhetoric is constructed on the basis that at least one level of its implied readership would know.

Hartz (2007: 161) adopts an extreme position on this, writing of this very poem that the difficulties faced by modern readers in understanding the poem were matched by those of Catullus' contemporaries who were not in his inner circle of friends, since 'the addressee of these epigrams was the group of the Neoterics, they were not intended for the general public.' He sees this as part of their 'social discourse of the exclusion of the public from the results of literary production', a social discourse that finds its equivalent in Hellenistic poetics of exclusion. This is an attractive notion when applied to many of the epigrams, but it is problematic for *c.* 108, with its appeal to the will of the people and its condemnation not of napkin-stealing or incest behind closed doors but of the use of the tongue in such a way as to render it the enemy of good men. The very vagueness of Cominius' unclean morals and wicked tongue produce a complex effect in generating an implied audience. It constructs a community, the *populus* ready to express its *arbitrium*, who are so familiar with Cominius' sins that they do not need them spelt out. The actual reader can resort to an Emperor's New Clothes pretence that she *is* familiar and tacitly enrol herself within that community. Every scenario constructs Cominius as a real person whose real actions have provoked Catullus' real feelings. Cominius is indeed a stock iambic target like Lycambes, Bupalus, or even Eurymedontiades. However, he is also a figure from the public life of the late Republic because *c.* 108 constructs him as one and constructs a readership that will read him as one.

Affiliating Cominius: The Political Question

Once the poem or its implied readers have constructed Cominius, the next question is what they have constructed him as. In the highly polarized political climate of the late Republic, we might expect a political attack on an individual to indicate in some way his political affiliation. If the addressee is indeed P. Cominius of Spoletium, then his prosecution of the *popularis* tribune C. Cornelius, opposed by gangs, would tend to align him with the optimate end of the political spectrum.[34] This would fit one sense of the *populi arbitrium* that may cause his death but 'the *lingua inimica bonorum* does not seem to fit very well a man who went in to bat for the most conservative part of the Senate' (Syndikus (1987) 122). Since Cominius' *mores impuri* are not only vague on details but politically neutral,

---

[34] I use the terms *popularis* and optimate in a broadly ideological rather than party-political sense, similar to that set out by Arena (2013) 8.

the only two remaining indications of what he has done wrong appear to pull in opposite directions.

Syndikus goes on to remark, 'but it is completely unclear what Catullus understands by *boni* here', and this is key. Political terminology in late Republican Rome was fluid and contested, and the usage of *boni* more than most. It had a socio-economic sense, those 'with considerable means that relieved them of the need to work, … respectable well-to-do pillars of society' (Mouritsen (2017) 81). This is the sense Catullus himself employs elsewhere in the phrase *boni beatique* (37.13), though with considerable complexity and irony (Krostenko (2000) 258–69). Hand-in-hand with that socio-economic sense went the political orientation most frequently manifested by that class, and its overlap with the etymologically related *optimates* reflected its association with conservative politics. Yet, that conservativism tended to construct itself as not only ethically normative but also all-encompassing. The politically loaded use of *boni* was particularly suited to 'pushing an ideology that is both conservative and inclusive' (Stone (2005) 60). Indeed, Lacey (1970: 13) has argued that '*boni* are those who support the laws and seek civil concord through consensus politics, and that this is what the common people really want'.

It is beyond the scope of this article to explore Cicero's use of the word *boni*, but even the smaller sample of instances where he refers to someone or something as *inimicus bonorum* (or *bonis*) confirms this tendency to elide the distinction between the ethical and the socio-political, to reach for what could be considered consensus between the orders or the disingenuous appropriation of the people's political will against their own interests. The description of Gabinius' treatment of the *publicani* in Syria comes closest to acknowledging the word's narrower social, economic, and political connotations, calling him 'the foe of the Senate, greatest enemy of the equestrian order and of all good men' (*hostem senatus, inimicissimum ordinis equestris bonorumque omnium*, *Prov. cons.* 11). Yet even here Cicero exploits the totalizing, inclusive force of *boni omnes* simultaneously to associate it with the higher orders and to imply that even those outside those orders, if they are truly good, would naturally align themselves with them. The totalizing, ethical appropriation of the term is more noticeable in its application to two of Cicero's three *bêtes noires*, enemies of decency and right, but also *popularis* opponents of the socially elite and politically conservative. He conjures inconceivable atrocities that Antonius might commit if he grew angry, on the *a fortiori* principle that, even when he was not angry, 'he was an enemy to all good men' (*omnibus bonis fuerit inimicus*, *Phil.* 3.30). Most strikingly for *c.* 108, the peroration of the *First Catilinarian* prays that Jupiter will keep Catiline and his confederates away from the markedly popular features of the city's roofs and walls (*tectis urbis ac moenibus*), will protect the lives and fortune of all citizens (*ciuium omnium*), and deliver to eternal punishment 'these fellows who are foes of the good, enemies of their homeland' (*homines bonorum inimicos, hostis patriae*, *Cat.* 1.33). Unlike his tactic with Gabinius, here Cicero begins with an inclusive picture of the Roman people, and one with an emphasis on the people, then seamlessly applies the loaded term *boni* to them, thus aligning them with the conservative element to which Catiline was opposed.

Catullus' depiction of Cominius as someone who, while his tongue was an enemy of the *boni*, could still die *populi arbitrio* has much in common with Cicero's use of *boni* as a vague, inclusive, and appropriative term that could be tendentiously applied to the common people. The tendency of that usage to be employed by conservatives against *popularis* targets does not correspond as closely with the apparent political leanings of P. Cominius. However, the uncertainty about his wider political career and even about whether he is the addressee of *c.* 108 make this a lesser consideration. More significantly for our exploration of 'a defined literary tradition adapted to the realities of the moment', the poem's juxtaposition of the popular and the conservative corresponds not only to contemporary Ciceronian rhetoric, but to the traditions of iambos. Despite the self-representation of Archilochus and Hipponax as outsiders, critics have increasingly shown how the genre tends to appeal to the normative values of the community and that those values tend towards conservatism: 'a conservative attitude prevails and works toward the reestablishment of idealized social norms that allow society to function smoothly' (Hawkins (2014) 91). The similarity to Lacey on Cicero is striking. Both Cicero and Catullus can be read as tendentiously uniting disparate parts of the community through their shared opposition to an enemy of the whole community who must be killed or expelled, a *pharmakos* like Eurymedontiades. Nevertheless, the very extremity of Catullus' juxtaposition of *populus* and *boni*, and the ambiguity of the target's transgressions and his affiliations, could also serve to interrogate and problematize this collapsing of political polarities, this disingenuous appeal to consensus that is actually prestidigitation of language. Catullus may be imitating Cicero in constructing a community, but he may also be drawing attention to the problematic aspects of that very process.

Sentencing Cominius: The Legal Question

For Gnilka (1973: 258), in his splendid – and solitary – study of *c.* 108, 'the understanding of the poem stands and falls with the expression *populi arbitrio* in line 1' and he goes on to specify, 'the expression does not belong to juristic language, does not at all constitute a genuine legal process.' This is the starting point for his argument that the poem depicts an act not of legal execution but of *Lynchjustiz.* Gnilka is perfectly correct about *populi arbitrium,* but the tendency of critics to give it an unmerited legal status is in itself significant. The closest parallel, in time and (Gnilka's) sense, though he does not cite it, is in Philus' speech on the preferability of the mixed constitution to simple constitutions, including democracy's tendency to be a euphemism for ochlocracy: *si uero populus plurimum potest omniaque eius arbitrio reguntur, dicitur illa libertas, est uero licentia.* ('If indeed the people have the most power and everything is governed by their will, that is called freedom, but it is really licentiousness', Cic. *Rep.* 3.23.6).[35] Philus uses *arbitrium* to cast the legitimate,

---

[35] Zetzel (1996) 302: 'a reductionist version of Scipio's account of constitutions in Book 1'.

democratic power of the people as arbitrary caprice, because that is his construction of the nature of democracy.

The word is particularly suited to this role by its semantic range, covering the spectrum from 'the power of judging or deciding ... regarded as a right' (*OLD* 4) and 'control, supervision, direction, command, authority' (*OLD* 5) to '*(of more or less arbitrary and irresponsible action)* wish, whim, caprice, pleasure' (*OLD* 7b). The multivalence of the word can be felt in another passage where legitimate authority is travestied as whim. Among the indignities to which Horace claims Virtus does not stoop is the taking up or laying down of the axes of office by the authority/caprice of the popular breeze (*nec sumit aut ponit secures / arbitrio popularis aurae*, Hor. *Carm.* 3.2.19–20). Nisbet and Rudd (2004 ad loc.) note that, '[a]s *arbitrio* suggests a legal adjudication or at least a serious decision, it is paradoxically combined with *aurae*.' Certainly, the *arbitrium* of the people, sometimes alone, sometimes in conjunction with the Senate, is often depicted in straightforwardly legitimate terms, as when Caesar has Ariovistus cite the Roman people's custom of commanding the conquered according to their own authority, not another's ordinance (*non ad alterius praescriptum, sed ad suum arbitrium*, Caes. *BGall.* 1.36).[36] Most famously, Augustus claims to have transferred the *res publica* from his own power to the control of the Senate and people of Rome (*ex mea potestate in senatus populique Romani arbitrium*, Aug. *RG* 34).

It is this ambiguity that Catullus exploits to the full in *c.* 108. On one level, he performs the opposite operation to Cicero and Horace. Because *arbitrium* can refer to the caprice of arbitrary action, it is entirely appropriate to the arbitrary caprice of *Volksjustiz*.[37] At the same time, because *populi arbitrium* is so often used to refer to the legitimate authority of the people, that sense is strongly evoked. Cicero and Horace taint legitimate popular authority with the suggestion of arbitrary whim by using unambiguously pejorative terms such as *licentia* and *aura* to pull *arbitrium* to the capricious end of it semantic range, while still acknowledging but rejecting its more respectable sense, 'the authority of the people, as some consider it, but we all know it is really the whim of the people'. Catullus conversely depicts a lynching as a pseudo-legitimate decree by a *contio*, 'the whim of the people, as some would doubtless consider it, but such is the sovereignty of the community that it is really the authority of the people.'

This appeal to the authority of the community and the attempt to legitimize it are, once again, very characteristic of iambos. To return to Hipponax fr. 126, we have already seen the appeal to collective authority in assigning Eurymedontiades' death to the βουλὴ δημοσίη, a phrase strikingly similar to *populi arbitrium*. Hipponax also mentions a ψηφὶς κακή, an ambiguous phrase that could mean the legitimate casting of votes or the arbitrary casting of stones. By either obfuscating whether Eurymedontiades' death is an execution or a lynching, or collapsing the distinction between the two, Hipponax bestows

---

[36] There are also a number of examples in Livy. People alone: 4.43.5; 26.33.12; 31.11.17; 37.49.4; with the senate: 33.14.10; cf. *in senatus arbitrio ... et in potestate populi*, 10.24.7.

[37] On *Volksjustiz*: Usener (1901).

legitimacy on this act of mob-violence. Catullus makes the same move with *populi arbitrium.* As with his Ciceronian conflation of the *populus* and the *boni*, this move has the potential to be read as Catullus' own or as an indication of the sort of move that others make. Perhaps Catullus is legitimizing mob-violence. But perhaps he is drawing attention to how such legitimation is performed: 'the authority of the people and the whim of the people are expressed by the same two words and that is just the sort of sleight-of-hand that can be used to delegitimize popular authority or to legitimize mob violence'.

Executing Cominius: The Practical Question

As with Cominius' identity, his transgressions, and his political affiliation, *c.* 108 leaves the manner of his death deliberately vague: he simply 'dies' (*intereat*). It cannot be ruled out that he is to be executed by the public executioner, the fate Ovid predicts for Ibis. The studied ambiguity of *populi arbitrium* just about leaves this possibility open, but we have seen that it strongly tends towards the legitimation of popular justice rather than the denigration of state justice. If the reader is to envisage Cominius' death as an act of *Volksjustiz*, she might imagine a stoning, as explicitly predicted by Horace's *puer* and implied by Hipponax's ψηφὶς κακή. There is nothing in the poem that would rule this out, but neither is there much in its favour apart from these far-from-telling parallels and the general association of stoning with popular justice, and even that tends to be Greek rather than Roman.[38]

Gnilka's argument was that Cominius is the victim of *discerptio*, the tearing apart of the victim by the mob. Not only was this an established form of *Volksjustiz*, traditionally dating back to the senators' tearing to pieces of Romulus, but it was widely attested in the late Republic. Perhaps the most famous example and the one closest personally to Catullus, though it lay up to a decade in the future when *c.* 108 was written, was the *discerptio* of C. Helvius Cinna, mistaken by a mob for the liberator Cornelius Cinna and torn to pieces.[39] Valerius Maximus also describes the dismemberment of the urban praetor Sempronius Asellio by a mob in 89 BCE when he was supporting debtors in a dispute between them and moneylenders.[40] The most vivid description of *discerptio* and the most suggestive for a reading of *c.* 108 is Florus' of those

---

[38] On stoning in Greece: Pease (1907); Gras (1984); Rosivach (1987); Forsdyke (2008). It was also part of various *pharmakos* rituals: Bremmer (1983). Thomson (1997) 544 asserts, with no parallels, 'death by lynch law ... in Rome usually involved stoning', but see Nippel (1995) 43–4 for stoning as a Greek and Jewish punishment, of limited use in Rome, where *discerptio* was the more usual collective execution. On the contested status of Caesar's assassination as a collective execution: E. Cowan (2015).

[39] Val. Max. 9.9.1; Plut. *Brut.* 20.4; *Caes.* 68.1–3; Suet. *Iul.* 85; App. *B Civ.* 2.147; Dio Cass. 44.50.4; Zonar. 10.12; Wiseman (1974) 44–58. Morgan (1990) convincingly shows that Ov. *Ib.* 539–40 also refer to Cinna's *discerptio.*

[40] Val. Max. 9.7.4. There is unsurprisingly no mention of *discerptio* in the extremely brief narrative at Livy, *Per.* 74: *in foro occisus est.* More intriguingly, Appian's version (*B Civ.* 1.54) begins with stoning, but only by a single stone (ἑνὸς δὲ λίθου τὸ πρῶτον ἐπ᾽ αὐτὸν ἀφεθέντος), and then proceeds to an almost Aeschylean perverted sacrifice, where Asellio's throat is cut (ἔσφαξαν) while he is sacrificing (ἔθυε) to the Dioscuri.

which took place in the Sullan proscriptions, almost dismissed by *praeteritio*, but in such a way that their horror is the more emphasized:

> longum post haec referre ludibrio habita fata Carbonis, fata Sorani, Plaetorios atque Venuleios, Baebium sine ferro ritu ferarum inter manus lancinatum, Marium, ducis ipsius fratrem, apud Catuli sepulchrum oculis effossis, manibus cruribusque effractis seruatum aliquandiu, ut per singula membra moreretur.

> Flor. 2.9

> It would be long-winded after these things to relate the fate of Carbo, the fate of Soranus, treated as a joke, men like Plaetorius and Venuleius, Baebius torn apart without iron, in the manner of wild beasts, among men's hands, Marius, the son of the general himself, at the tomb of Catulus, his eyes dug out, hands and legs snapped off, preserved for some time, so that he might die one limb at a time.

Many aspects of this gruesome picture resonate with *c.* 108, in particular the very iambic combination of mockery (*ludibrio*) with violence, and the detailed, mimetic reduction of the body to its constituent parts. However, the deaths of Cinna, Asellio, Baebius, and Marius all show that, in the late Republic, the horrific act of *discerptio* did not merely conjure memories of Romulus or Mettius Fufidius in the distant past but were very much part of 'the realities of the moment'.[41]

Dismembering Cominius: The Pragmatic Question

As with stoning, there is no explicit indication of *discerptio* in *c.* 108, but unlike with stoning, the poem itself can be seen to enact the violent process of dismemberment. Gnilka seems to be approaching a similar observation, only to draw back. He rightly emphasizes the importance of the poem's structure to its meaning, but primarily because its 'conciseness' (*Knappheit*) indicates that the *populus* from line 1 and not the animals tear Cominius apart (1973: 261). However, *c.* 108 does not merely indicate but *enacts* the dismemberment of its victim, moving from the integrity of the whole body to the increasing fragmentation of its constituent parts. The use of bodily metaphors for the text facilitates the simultaneous, mimetic dismemberment of the body in the text and the text in the body.[42] This equivalence is particularly prominent in Senecan tragedy, where the 'indecorous mangling of the body in the text … [is] parallel to the mangling of the body of the text.'[43] Catullus presents a repulsive, dismembered poem that is mimetic of and embodied by the repulsive, dismembered corpse of Cominius, a spectacle to prompt the public disgust and derision that cap his punishment.[44] However, there is at least as much

---

[41] Cf. Gnilka (1973) 261.

[42] See esp. Keith (1994), (1999) and on the text as body: Farrell (1999), (2007).

[43] Cowan (2017) 111–15, quoting from 114. See also Most (1992) esp. 406–8; Staley (2010) 114–20; Kennedy (2018) esp. 232–45.

[44] Cf. Richlin (1988) 360 on the reduction of Cominius' body to 'food out of place'.

focus on the process of dismemberment as on the end result, and on the iamb-ist's violence upon his target and his poem. By enacting the violence it describes, the poem becomes a speech act.[45]

The Catullan corpus is particularly rich in speech acts. His poems repeatedly collapse the distinction between the description or threat of action and its per-formance. The 'not good words' that he enjoins Furius and Aurelius to carry to his girl are already carried to her by *c.* 11 itself, but the illocutionary force of the utterance extends beyond doing what it purports to ask others to do. The poem marks the dissolution of his relationship with Lesbia and, since that rela-tionship is pervasively depicted as a marriage, so its dissolution is depicted as divorce. This divorce is performed by the poem through Catullus' evocation of the legal procedure whereby a messenger is employed (Mayer (1983) 297). If Hawkins is correct that Furius and Aurelius are also being cast in the role of the 'iambic herald', a common figure in Archilochus, Hipponax, and other iambists, then the interconnection of Roman custom, iambic convention, and pragmatics is even closer.[46]

However, it is in the more overtly aggressive *iamboi*, where verbal or phys-ical violence is threatened, that we can most clearly see how that violence is also pragmatically enacted. In *c.* 37, Catullus' abusive attack on Lesbia's lovers in the 'randy inn' is constituted both by the graffiti dicks (*sopiones*, 10) he threatens to paint on its walls and by the poem's own description of those dicks and of the act of painting them.[47] Furthermore, the painting and writing of these mimetic dicks also equate to Catullus' threatened, hypermasculine penetration of his targets (*una ducentos irrumare sessores*, 37.8), his response to their (projected) emasculating belief that only they have dicks (*solis putatis esse mentulas uobis*, 37.3). The equivalence between textual and sexual violence is even closer in *c.* 16, where the threat of anal and oral rape is enacted by the poem itself. Furius and Aurelius' reading of Catullus' appropriation of their words means that he is stuffing those aggressively phallic words into their mouths (Stroup (2010) 225). The level of detail with which the style and struc-ture of Catullus' poems enact the violence they threaten can be seen in Fletcher's (2017) observation that the sequence of the threats, *pedicabo* fol-lowed by *irrumabo*, constitutes 'ATM' or 'ass-to-mouth'. The detail that Catullus' penis will have been in Furius' and Aurelius' anuses before he forces it into their mouths, with the implications of ingesting faecal matter and pro-ducing an *os impurum*, adds an extra degree of humiliation to the poem's threat and its textual enactment.

These Catullan speech acts are particularly concentrated in his more overtly iambic poems. For *iambos* itself is closely bound up with the violent physical effects of its verbal violence. Catullus himself evokes the image of *iambos* as a

---

[45] Cf. Morgan (2019) 642: 'Horace has Lupus "overwhelmed by slanderous verses" (..., *Serm.* 2.1.68), as if his treatment in Lucilius' satire were tantamount to being stoned.'

[46] Hawkins (2018), citing as examples (1612–13) Archil. fr. 109 West, Hippon. fr. 130 Degani = 118E West, fr. 17 Degani = 1 West, Sus. fr. 1.1 West, and Phoen. fr. 1.13–15 Powell, Callim. *Ia.* 1.1 Pfeiffer.

[47] Watson (2009) 134.

weapon to be hurled (ἰάπτειν) when he threatens to 'brandish fierce iamboi' (*truces uibrare iambos*, 36.5). Wray writes of Meleager's epigram on Archilochus,

> 'Ravaging' is not a strong translation for the act of hubris wrought by [Archilochus'] poetry, through the performative, aesthetic excellence of poetic charm granted by the Muses to their soldier-squire. The poetic aggression of his iambic shafts, it is not excessive to say, has raped and murdered the daughters of Lycambes.[48]

Once again, Hipponax fr. 126 offers a particularly clear example. One could take ὅπως ... ὅληται as an indirect question, with future indicative, so that the Muse is asked to tell how Eurymedontiades will die, and this would correspond closely to Catullus' predictions of Cominius' death and dismemberment, predictions which also enact that death and dismemberment. However, it is more attractive to take it as a final clause, with aorist subjunctive, so that the Muse's utterance (which is of course Hipponax's utterance) will be the direct cause of Eurymedontiades' death, so that the equivalence between description and enactment is even closer. The way in which the stylistic details of the text serve to enact the violence in detail is also a feature of archaic iambos, and Telò (2019: 286–7) has recently demonstrated how the experience of reading Hipponax is mimetic of the suffering of his iambic targets. Particularly pertinent for *c.* 108 is Worman's observation that writers of iambos and satyr plays 'describe the grotesque body in piecemeal fashion, with its most disreputable parts foregrounded especially when being beaten, abused, denied, or threatened with a dismemberment that reiterates the representational scheme'.[49] Dismemberment, both bodily and textual, and the illocutionary enactment of violence are central features of iambos, and Catullus incorporates both into *c.* 108.

Cominius' body is verbally torn into its component parts, as the integral *Cominius* of line 1 is reduced to *lingua, oculi, intestina* and *cetera membra*. The process of reducing a coherent and substantial whole into smaller and smaller pieces is further enacted as the body of the poem, a single, ample sentence spanning three full elegiac couplets, is fragmented into ever decreasing cola. Its linguistic limbs (κῶλα, *membra*) dwindle in size from the tongue's line-and-a-half to the eyes' single hexameter to the mere hemiepes assigned to and representing each of the intestines and – whether the phrase is dismissive or euphemistic – the other limbs. The poem's illocutionary violence also extends to points of stylistic detail. Whether we take the elision of *lingu(a) exsect(a) auido* as brutal apocope or smearing synaloepha, the effect is a gruesome one: either there is a grim mimesis of cutting or the absence of metrical articulation leaves the reader with a shapeless lump of flesh tossed to the vulture.[50]

---

[48] Wray (2001) 181.

[49] Worman (2008) 126–7. Cf. J. N. Hawkins (2016) on the iambist's body, and esp. its biliousness, as emblematic of the genre.

[50] Cf. Morgan (2010) 330–1 on the heavy elisions in *Aen.* 3.658: 'a line lacking definition illustrates a creature [sc. Polyphemus] whose monstrous ugliness fundamentally consists in being misshapen – a lack of that *forma*, "shape", "arrangement", "beauty", which is equally a quality of a passage of metrical language.'

Catullus' depiction of Cominius' dismemberment is closely grounded in 'the realities of the moment', a time of mob violence when people such as Asellio, Baebius, and Cinna were torn to pieces. His illocutionary enactment of it in a threat that is its own fulfilment situates the poem in the 'defined literary tradition' of iambos. However, this is not merely another generic feature that can be adapted to the realities of the moment. Because the illocutionary force of iambic utterance emphasizes its ability to impact upon the real world around it, Catullus' decision to dismember Cominius textually is a self-conscious reflection on *how* iambos operates in his contemporary world. Iambos cannot exist in a cage of the Muses because it has real effects in the real world. *C.* 108 does not literally tear Cominius to pieces any more than Hipponax fr. 126 literally kills Eurymedontiades, like some Ephesian Avada Kedavra curse. Yet the conceit that it does so foregrounds the potential of hate-speech, that describing men as gut-knives or having tongues hostile to all good men leads directly to physical violence, so insulting your enemy is as good (or bad) as killing him. Iambos kills and *c.* 108 reflects Catullus' realization of this.

Reading Catullus: The Final Question

The reader may take this realization as something that the poem embraces or that it reacts against. What sort of poem would we expect 'our' Catullus to write?[51] We should be wary of domesticating Catullus and transforming all his unsettling Otherness into a modern, liberal commentary on that Otherness.[52] Iambos too can be taken as a self-critical genre that problematizes its own violence, but Carey and others have made a strong case for its normative assertion of mainstream values: 'Archilochus the outsider is not a modern invention (he is there in Critias); but invention he is. ... Archilochus' attacks are firmly based on shared social values. It is the victim, not the poet, who is marginalised.'[53] It is certainly possible to read *c.* 108 as subtly, deliberately, and effectively employing the strategies that this article has detected: the legitimation of mob justice, the disingenuous construction of a community of *boni*, the endorsement of violence resulting from and enacted by hate-speech. However, Catullus long post-dated Critias and the ancient 'invention' of the problematic iambist as outsider. We need not construct an idealized, romanticized Catullus to imagine a poet profoundly familiar with the idea of iambos and its ambivalent reputation, employing the art that reveals art to show how problematic the adaptation of a defined literary tradition to the realities of the moment could be, when that tradition is iambos and those realities those of political violence. But the question remains open: how do you like your Catullus?[54]

---

[51] Note Syndikus' (1987: 123) discomfort: 'That a cultivated man like Catullus could take up such a repulsive subject as wishful thinking is fundamentally horrific and can probably only be understood from the historical circumstances of his environment.'

[52] On Catullus' Otherness: Wiseman (1985) 1–14, esp. 5–10 on violence.

[53] Carey (2009) 159; cf. Carey (2018) 17–18.

[54] See R. Cowan (2015) 49–52.

Bibliography

Alexandrou, M. (2016), 'Hipponax and the *Odyssey*: Subverting Text and Intertext', in A. Efstathiou and I. Karamanou (eds.), *Homeric Receptions Across Generic and Cultural Contexts*. Berlin, 31–44.

Allan, W. (ed.) (2019), *Greek Elegy and Iambus: A Selection*. Cambridge.

Arena, V. (2013), Libertas *and the Practice of Politics in the Late Roman Republic*. Cambridge.

Bremmer, J. (1983), 'Scapegoat Rituals in Ancient Greece', *HSCPh* 87, 299–320.

Brown, C. (1997), 'Iambos', in D. E. Gerber (ed.), *A Companion to the Greek Lyric Poets*. Leiden, 13–88.

Brown, C. (2018), 'Picturing a Truth: Beast Fable, Early Iambos, and Semonides on the Creation of Women', *Mouseion* 15, 29–47.

Carey, C. (2009), 'Iambos', in F. Budelmann (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Lyric*. Cambridge, 149–67.

Carey, C. (2018), 'Narrative, Authority, and Blame', *Mouseion* 15, 7–27.

Compton, T. (2006), *Victim of the Muses: Poet as Scapegoat, Warrior, and Hero in Greco-Roman and Indo-European Myth and History*. Washington, DC.

Cowan, E. (2015), 'Caesar's One Fatal Wound: Suetonius *Divus Iulius* 82.3', *HSCPh* 108, 361–76.

Cowan, R. (2015), 'On Not Being Archilochus Properly: Cato, Catullus and the Idea of Iambos', *MD* 74, 9–52.

Cowan, R. (2017), 'Bloated Buskins: Seneca and the Satiric Idea of Tragedy', *Ramus* 46, 75–117.

Degani, E. (1984), *Studi su Ipponatte*. Bari.

Degani, E. (ed.) (1991), *Hipponactis Fragmenta et Testimonia*. 2nd edition. Stuttgart and Leipzig.

Degl'Innocenti Pierini, R. (2003), 'Le tentazioni giambiche del poeta elegiaco: Ovidio esule e i suoi nemici', in R. Gazich (ed.), *Fecunda licentia. Tradizione e innovazione in Ovidio elegiac*. Milano, 119–49.

Du Quesnay, I. and Woodman, T. (2012), 'Epilogue', in *Catullus: Poems, Books, Readers*. Cambridge, 255–72.

Ellis, R. (1876), *A Commentary on Catullus*. Oxford.

Faraone, C. A. (2004), 'Hipponax Fragment 128W: Epic Parody or Expulsive Incantation?' *ClAnt* 23, 209–45.

Farrell, J. (1999), 'The Ovidian Body: Poetic Body and Poetic Text', in A. Barchiesi, P. Hardie and S. E. Hinds (eds.), *Ovidian Transformations*. Cambridge, 113–36

Farrell, J. (2007), 'Horace's Body, Horace's Books', in S. J. Heyworth, P. G. Fowler, and S. J. Harrison (eds.), *Classical Constructions: Papers in Memory of Don Fowler, Classicist and Epicurean*. Oxford, 174–93.

Fletcher, K. B. F. (2017), 'Catullus' "ATM": The Word Order of *Carmen* 16.1 and the Roman Hierarchy of Sexual Humiliation', *CPh* 112, 487–92.

Forsdyke, S. L. (2008), 'Street Theatre and Popular Justice in Ancient Greece: Shaming, Stoning and Starving Offenders inside and outside the Courts', *P&P* 201, 3–50.

Gnilka, C. (1973), 'Lynchjustiz bei Catull', *RhM* 116, 256–69.

Gras, M. (1984), 'Cité grecque et lapidation', in *Du châtiment dans la cité. Supplices corporels et peine de mort dans le monde antique*. Paris, 75–89.

Griffin, M. (1973), 'The Tribune C. Cornelius', *JRS* 63, 196–213.

Guida, A. (1994), 'La condanna del ghiottone (Ipponatte fr. 128 West = 126 Degani)', *ZPE* 104, 23–4.

Hartz, C. (2007), *Catulls Epigramme im Kontext hellenistischer Dichtung*. Berlin/New York.

Hawkins, J. N. (2016), 'Anger, Bile, and the Poet's Body in the Archilochean Tradition', in Swift and Carey (2016), 310–39.

Hawkins, S. (2012), 'On the Oscanism *salaputium* in Catullus 53', *TAPhA* 142, 329–53.

Hawkins, S. (2018), 'Catullus *c.* 11 and the Iambic Herald', *Paideia* 73, 1605–16.

Hawkins, S. (2019), 'Archilochus 222W and 39W: Allusion and Reception, Hesiod and Catullus', *Philologus* 163, 16–46.

Hawkins, T. (2014), *Iambic Poetics in the Roman Empire*. Cambridge.

Hawkins, T. (2016), 'Bupalus in Scheria: Hipponax's Odyssean Transcontextualizations', in Swift and Carey (2016), 229–52.

Heyworth, S. J. (2001), 'Catullian Iambics, Catullian Iambi', in A. Cavarzere, A. Aloni and A. Barchiesi (eds.), *Iambic Ideas: Essays on a Poetic Tradition from Archaic Greece to the Late Roman Empire*. Lanham, 117–40.

Holzberg, N. (2002), *Catull. Der Dichter und sein erotisches Werk*. München.

Hutchinson, G. O. (2012), 'Booking lovers: Desire and Design in Catullus', in I. Du Quesnay and T. Woodman (eds.), *Catullus: Poems, Books, Readers*. Cambridge, 48–78.

Ingleheart, J. (2014), 'Play on the Proper Names of Individuals in the Catullan Corpus: Wordplay, the Iambic Tradition, and the Late Republican Culture of Public Abuse', *JRS* 104, 51–72.

Irwin, E. (1998), 'Biography, Fiction, and the Archilochean *ainos*', *JHS* 118, 177–83.

Kaster, R. (ed.) (2006), *Cicero: Speech on Behalf of Publius Sestius*. Oxford.

Keith, A. M. (1994), '*corpus eroticum*: Elegiac Poetics and Elegiac *puellae* in Ovid's *Amores*', *CW* 88, 27–40.

Keith, A. M. (1999), 'Slender Verse: Roman Elegy and Ancient Rhetorical Theory', *Mnemosyne* 52, 41–62.

Kelly, A. (forthcoming), 'Homer and Hipponax', in V. Cazzato and E. Prodi (eds.), *The Limping Muse: Hipponax the Poet*. Cambridge.

Kennedy, D. F. (2018), 'Dismemberment and the Critics: Seneca's *Phaedra*', in M. R. Gale and J. H. D. Scourfield (eds.), *Texts and Violence in the Roman World*. Cambridge, 215–45.

Koenen, L. (1977), 'Horaz, Catull und Hipponax', *ZPE* 26, 73–93.

Koster, S. (1980), *Die Invektive in der griechischen und römischen Literatur*. Meisenheim am Glam.

Krasne, D. (2012), 'The Pedant's Curse: Obscurity and Identity in Ovid's *Ibis*', *Dictynna* 9 http://dictynna.revues.org/912

Kroll, W. (ed.) (1922), *C. Valerius Catullus*. Stuttgart.

Krostenko, B. (2000), '*Arbitria Vrbanitatis*: Language, Style, and Characterization in Catullus cc. 39 and 37', *ClAnt* 20, 239–72.

Lacey, W. K. (1970), '*Boni atque improbi*', *G&R* 17, 3–16.

Lavigne, D. (2010), 'Catullus 8 and Catullan Iambos', *SyllClass* 21, 65–92.

Lennartz, K. (2010), *Iambos: philologische Untersuchungen zur Geschichte einer Gattung in der Antike*. Wiesbaden.

Lewis, R. G. (ed.) (2006), *Asconius: Commentaries on Speeches of Cicero*. Oxford.

Lintott, A. (1999 [1968]), *Violence in Republican Rome*. 2nd edition. Oxford.

Malcovati, E. (ed.) (1972), *L. Annaei Flori quae exstant*. 2nd edition. Rome.

Mankin, D. (ed.) (1995), *Horace: Epodes*. Cambridge.

Mayer, R. G. (1983), 'Catullus' Divorce' *CQ* 33, 297–8.

Millar, F. (1998), *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic*. Ann Arbor.

Morgan, J. D. (1990), 'The Death of Cinna the Poet', *CQ* 40, 558–9.

Morgan, Ll. (2010), *Musa Pedestris: Metre and Meaning in Roman Verse*. Oxford.

Morgan, Ll. (2019), '"To Heaven on a Hook" (Dio Cass. 60.35.4): Ennius, Lucilius and an Ineffectual Council of the Gods in *Aeneid* 10', *CQ* 69, 636–53.

Most, G. W. (1992), '*Disiecti membra poetae*: The Rhetoric of Dismemberment in Neronian Poetry', in R. Hexter and D. Selden (eds.), *Innovations of Antiquity*. New York, 391–419.

Mouritsen, H. (2001), *Plebs and Politics in the Late Roman Republic*. Cambridge

Mouritsen, H. (2017), *Politics in the Roman Republic*. Cambridge.

Mynors, R. A. B. (ed.) (1958), *C. Valerii Catulli: Carmina*. Oxford.

Neudling, C. L. (1955), *A Prosopography to Catullus*. Oxford.

Newman, J. K. (1990), *Roman Catullus and the Modification of the Alexandrian Sensibility*. Hildesheim.

Nippel, W. (1995), *Public Order in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge.

Owen, S. G. (ed.) (1915), *P. Ovidi Nasonis: Tristium Libri Quinque; Ibis; Ex Ponto Libri Quattuor; Halieutica Fragmenta*. Oxford.

Pease, A. S. (1907), 'Notes on Stoning among the Greeks and Romans', *TAPhA* 38, 5–18.

Quinn, K. (ed.) (1970), *Catullus: The Poems*. London.

Richlin, A. (1988), 'Systems of Food Imagery in Catullus', *CW* 81, 355–63.

Rosivach, V. (1987), 'Execution by Stoning in Athens', *ClAnt* 6, 232–48.

Rotstein, A. (2010), *The Idea of Iambos*. Oxford.

Russell, A. (2016), 'Why did Clodius Shut the Shops? The Rhetoric of Mobilizing a Crowd in the Late Republic', *Historia* 65, 186–210.

Schiesaro, A. (2011), '*Ibis redibis*', *MD* 67, 79–150.

Schwabe, L. (1862), *Quaestiones Catullianae*. Giessen.

Shackleton Bailey, D. (ed.) (2008), *Q. Horatius Flaccus: Opera*. 4th edition. Berlin.

Skinner, M. B. (2003), *Catullus in Verona: A Reading of the Elegiac Libellus, Poems 65-116*. Columbus, OH.

Staley, G. (2010), *Seneca and the Idea of Tragedy*. Oxford.

Stone, A. M. (2005), '*Optimates*: An Archaeology', in K. Welch and T. W. Hillard (eds.) *Roman Crossings: Theory and Practice in the Roman Republic*. Swansea, 59–94.

Stroup, S. C. (2010), *Catullus, Cicero, and a Society of Patrons: The Generation of the Text*. Cambridge.

Swift, L. (ed.) (2019), *Archilochus: The Poems*. Oxford.

Swift, L. and Carey, C. (eds.) (2016), *Iambus and Elegy: New Approaches*. Oxford.

Syndikus, H.-P. (1987), *Catull: Eine Interpretation. Dritter Teil: Die Epigramme (69-116)*. Darmstadt.

Tatum, W. J. (2007), 'Social Commentary and Political Invective', in M. Skinner (ed.), *A Companion to Catullus*. Blackwell, 333–53

Telò, M. (2019), 'Iambic Horror: Shivers and Brokenness in Archilochus and Hipponax', in L. Kurke, N. A. Weiss, and M. Foster (eds.), *Genre in Archaic and Classical Greek Poetry: Theories and Models*. Leiden, 271–97.

Thomson, D. F. S. (ed.) (1997), *Catullus*. Toronto.

Usener, H. (1901), 'Italische Volksjustiz', *RhM* 56, 1–28.

Vine, B. (2009), 'A Hipponactean Echo in Catullus (*Frigus*, 44.20)', *CPh* 104, 213–16.

Watson, L. C. (1991), *Arae: The Curse-Poetry of Antiquity*. Leeds.

Watson, L. C. (2003), *A Commentary on Horace's Epodes*. Oxford.

Watson, L. C. (2009), 'Catullus and the Brothel-Creepers: *Carmen* 37', *Antichthon* 43, 123–36.

West, M. L. (1974), *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus*. Berlin.

Wiseman, T. P. (1974), *Cinna the Poet and Other Roman Essays*. Leicester.

Wiseman, T. P. (1985), *Catullus and his World: A Reappraisal*. Cambridge.

Worman, N. (2008), *Abusive Mouths in Classical Athens*. Cambridge.

Wray, D. (2001), *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood*. Cambridge.

Zetzel, J. E. G. (1996), 'Natural Law and Poetic Justice: A Carneadean Debate in Cicero and Virgil', *CPh* 91, 297–319.