FEEDING AURELIUS' HUNGER: CATULLUS 21*

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ABSTRACT

Scholars see the insult of Cat. 21 in the inappropriateness of Aurelius' being poor and a rival or in the inappropriateness of his being a parasite and a rival. This paper argues against these interpretations because in the poem hunger does not stigmatize Aurelius as poor or a parasite but rather as a promiscuous sodomite. For this reason Cat. 21 should be understood in the context of the traditional Roman view of masculinity: appropriate domination is an affirmation of healthy masculinity; inappropriate submission is unhealthy emasculation. The paper also suggests that Cat. 21 is an elaboration of a standard insult, 'esuresis et me felas', threatening a dissatisfying and sexually humiliating 'feeding' of Aurelius' empty belly and a sexually dissatisfying and humiliating fulfillment of Aurelius' carnal desires. In making these insults, Catullus can be said to have put Aurelius, excessively indulging his masculine lust, in his submissive place.

Aureli, pater esuritionum,
non harum modo, sed quot aut fuerunt
aut sunt aut alis erunt in annis,
pedicare cupis meos amores.
5
nec clam: nam simul es, iocaris una,
haerens ad latus omnia experiris.
frustra: nam insidias mihi instruentem
tangam te prior irrumatione.
atque id si faceres satur, tacerem:
nunc ipsum id doleo, quod esurire
meus iam puer et sitire discet.
quare desine, dum licet pudico,
ne finem facias, sed irrumatus.¹

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¹ The Latin text of Catullus is from K. Quinn, Catullus. The Poems (London 1973).
Aurelius, sire of starvations, not just of these, but of as many as were or are or will be in time to come, you want to fuck my love. Not on the sly: for with him you are, you joke together, clinging to his side you try everything. In vain: for while you plot against me, I will strike first, mouth-fucking you. Yet if you did it full, I’d keep quiet: now I worry about this very thing, that my boy will learn now to starve and thirst. So, stop, while you decently can, or else you will succeed, but in being mouth-fucked.

Catullus 21 – though sometimes classed with Catullus’ Juventius poems – should be grouped more properly with his poems of invective. ² The identity of the puer delicatus, unnamed but typically assumed to be Juventius,³ adds nothing to a poem, whose point is ridicule of another. Scholars see the insult resting in the inappropriateness of Aurelius’ being poor and a rival,⁴ or in the inappropriateness of his being a parasite and a rival – ‘a shocking offence against the class-distinctions which obtain in ancient poetry and life.’⁵ This paper argues against the poverty or parasite interpretation and suggests that (1) the insult should be understood in the context of the traditional Roman view of masculinity and that (2) it is an elaboration of a standard insult, which plays with an ambiguity between two common meanings of ‘esuritio’ and ‘esurore’ – hunger for food and hunger for sex.

One reason for viewing Aurelius as impoverished is his association with Furia. Crediting his tutor R.G.C. Levens, Thomson writes: ‘Furia and Aurelius are so closely associated that the same gibe about going short of food and drink can be used indifferently about one or the other.’⁷ The reasons for linking the two are as follows. Furia is characterized as poor

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³ I have no disagreement with identifying ‘meos amores’ as Juventius.
⁷ Thomson (note 2) 257. See also Kroll (note 5) 39.
in poems 23, 24 (probably), and 26 (probably). Line 11 of poem 23 mentions Furius’ hunger – ‘sole et frigore et esuritione’; the rest of the poem makes clear his lack of resources. Though it does not mention his financial situation, poem 21 likewise uses ‘esuritio’ to speak of Aurelius’ hunger – ‘pater esuritionum’. Furthermore, Furius and Aurelius are closely associated in poems 11 and 16. Therefore it seems reasonable to view the two as interchangeable.

But viewing the evidence in this way does not do justice to the different ways Catullus vilifies them and the different ways he uses ‘esuritio’. Though Furius and Aurelius share the mistake of equating Catullus’ poetry with his self (poem 16) and share a willingness to undergo hazardous journeys (poem 11), they are not interchangeable cogs. In poem 23 Furius’ hunger is mentioned as a manifestation of his lack of resources, resulting in a body, with a dryness which offers him many benefits. We have no idea of the reality of his financial situation. Nor do we require this information. It is enough to know that Furius has asked for a loan and Catullus wittily uses the blessings of Furius’ actual or imagined beggary so as to refuse. Though in poem 24 he uses poverty as the reason why Juventius should reject Furius and in poem 26 he pokes fun at Furius’ mortgaged villa, Catullus takes a positive or neutral view of his own poverty. In poem 13 he makes a virtue of his own lack of funds in his invitation to Fabullus. In poem 10 his failure to enrich himself at Bithynia is not to be held against him. Just as his view of poverty may change as the dramatic situation demands, so does his use of ‘esuritio’ in poems 21 and 23 differ. Poem 23 links ‘esuritio’ to Furius’ poverty. Poem 21, however, ...

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* The phrase ‘cui neque servus est neque area’ from poem 24 is the same as the first line of poem 23.
* Quinn (note 1) cautions against taking poem 23 as prima facie evidence for Furius’ poverty, noting that ‘clearly Furius is being got at, his domestic circumstances misrepresented or exaggerated.’
* It may very well be that in his request for money Furius exaggerated his need. Catullus then uses Furius’ own exaggeration against him.
* The irony of this poem should not be missed – on the grounds that Furius is poor, Catullus wishes that Juventius had given him the wealth of Midas rather than sex. But had he done that, the basis for Catullus’ pique would be gone. Rather than this irony, scholars (Ferguson [note 6] 77; Macleod [note 6] 298) tend to see the point of the poem in the infringements of the conventions of poetic love, with Catullus playing the role of the bawd.
uses ‘esuritio’ in an entirely different sense – to attack Aurelius’ sexual appetite, not his poverty, as I argue in detail below. And so the attempt to view Aurelius as poor because of his association with Furius is circumstantial at best and ignores the different ways Catullus vilifies the two and uses ‘esuritio’.

The reason for viewing him as poor or a parasite is the epithet ‘pater esuritionum’, which commentators recognize as mock heroic.13 ‘Esuritio’ and ‘esurarre’ are attributes of the poor or parasitical.14 Hence the assumption that Aurelius is also. But ‘esurarre’ is used of a variety of people in a variety of contexts.15 Plautus, for example, uses it of people’s (parasites’ and others’) hunger for food and other things.16 Cicero uses it of Lucius Thorius Balbus to denote a good hunger, sharpened by exercise and appeased by eating.17 Its opposite is the jaded hunger of Seneca’s gourmand that must be sharpened by novelty.18 Quintus Curtius Rufus uses it of an Erysichthonian hunger which always requires more.19 There is no reason, then, to assume that ‘pater esuritionum’, by itself, characterizes Aurelius as

13 Ferguson (note 6) 65; Quinn (note 1) 154; Thomson (note 2) 258. For a similar mock invocation, see poem 49.
14 Macleod (note 6) 299 n. 1: ‘the point of mocking someone’s hunger is commonly to stigmatize him as a parasite.’ In support he cites Alciphron, Ep. Parasit., passim; Plaut. Mostell. 888, Stich. 155ff.; Ar. Ach. 855ff., Vesp. 1265ff.
15 For an explanation of why, according to the Hellenistic physician Erasistratus, ‘esurarre’ occurs, see Aulus Gellius, N.A. 16.3.
17 ‘Habebat tamen rationem valitudinis: utebatur iis exercitatioibus, ut ad cenam et sitiens et esuriens veniret, eo cibo qui et suavissimus esset et idem facillimus ad concoquendum, vino et ad voluptatem et ne noceret’ (Fin. 2.64.3).
18 ‘Adice obsonatores quibus dominici palati notitia subtilis est, qui sciunt cuius illum rei sapor excitet, cuius delectet aspectus, cuius novitate nauseabundus erigi possit, quid iam ipsa satietate fastidiat, quid illo die esuriet’ (Ep. 47.8.3).
19 ‘Quid tibi divitiis opus est, quae esurire te cogunt? Primus omnium satietate parasit famem, ut, quo plura haberes, acrius, quae non habes, cuperes’ (Alex. 7.8.20.2). See also Martial, who uses it to characterize his targets as miserly or greedy (1.99.9-15; 2.40); and to show his own plain living (5.78.1-5) and thrifty hunger (7.27.9-10).
either poor or a parasite.

This being the case, the maximum we can conclude from ‘pater esuritionum’ is that it marks Aurelius as really hungry. Were there anything in this poem or another to suggest his poverty or parasitical nature, then this interpretation should, perhaps, remain unchallenged. Such, however, is not the case. Rather, what we know about Aurelius is that his hunger is not for food but for Catullus’ boy and that he is a promiscuous sodomite:

\[
\text{pedicare cupis meos amores (21.4)}
\]

and

\[
\text{verum a te metuo tuoque pene infesto pueris bonis malisque.} \\
\text{(15.9-10)}
\]

but I am afraid of you and your prick harmful to boys, good and bad.

With these lines Catullus asks us to understand ‘pater esuritionum’ as marking Aurelius’ excessive and indiscriminate sexual hunger. But

\[\text{\textsuperscript{20} Even if it convicted him of poverty, not all impoverished are parasitical: temperament that subordinates everything, even sex, to the belly, makes the parasite: ‘Eugepae, quando adhibero, adludiabo: tum sum ridiculissimus’, Gelasimus (Stich. 381-82).} \]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{21} Although the use of ‘esuritio’ or ‘esurire’ in a sexual context is a typical one, the application of it to the active partner may seem counter-intuitive to those familiar with Roman sexual vocabulary, that gives the active partner as feeding the passive partner or his orifice: ‘culo ... voracio’ (Cat. 33.4); ‘grandia te medii tenta vorare viri’ (Cat. 80.6); ‘demisso se ipse voret capite’ (Cat. 88.8); ‘ille [culus] vorat’ (Martial 2.51.6); ‘sed plane medias vorat pulellas’ (Martial 7.67.15). At Martial 1.96.10, Maternus, suspected of effeminacy (‘susciper viru mollem’), devours boys with his eyes and watches their cocks with waiting lips: ‘sed spectat oculis devorantibus draucos / nec otiosis mentulas videt labris.’ Active partners feed with their penises: ‘ad cenam invitant omnes te, Phoebe cinaedi. / mentula quem pascit, non, puto purus homo est’ (Martial, 9.63). Ausonius provides an example of the penis drinking, but J.N. Adams, The Latin Sexual Vocabulary (Maryland 1982) 139, considers it an \textit{ad hoc} metaphor. And so, although one may think that ‘esuritio’ or ‘esurire’ would be used for the sexual hunger of the passive partner, the opposite is more often the case. I know of only one instance where ‘esurire’ is used of the passive partner’s desire: ‘Cosmus equitae magnus cinaedus et fellator esuris aperit mari(bus)’, CIL 4.1825, quoted in Adams 139.} \]
why is such a characterization insulting, especially since it is commonly understood that the ancient world understands manliness in terms of dominating (good) and being dominated (bad), and in the arena of sex the same terms apply: for adult males, active sex – vaginal, anal (the latter with either sex), or oral (from either sex) – means virility and power (that is, domination); and passive sex – vaginal, anal (the latter with either sex), or oral (on either sex) – is a sign of effeminacy and weakness (that is, submission)? The answer is that the equation, domination is good; submissiveness is bad, is too simplistic and needs qualification. One such qualification Williams rightly offers: ‘overall self-indulgence and inability to control oneself and one’s desires, even those usually thought of as masculine’, may mark one as unmanly. And so Catullus may condemn Memmius’s domination of him because Memmius is too excessive and greedy (28). Likewise Martial may mock Gellius for being unmanly, even though he is actively having sex with his wife:

Duxerat esuriens locupletem pauper anumque:
uxorem pascit Gellius et futuit.
(9.80)

A starving pauper married a woman, rich and old:
Gellius feeds his wife and fucks her.

A poor and hungry Gellius does not better his situation by marrying a rich old lady. Rather he serves and actively services her – that is, he is dominated by her. Cat. 21 also may mock, because his target,
Aurelius, though engaging in appropriately masculine active sex, is dominated by his sexual desires.

The shame of being dominated by carnal excess is just one part of the triple-pronged invective directed against Aurelius. Ambiguity between two common meanings of ‘esuritio’ and ‘esurire’ provides the additional barbs. Consider the wordplay in Plautus’ Captivi:

Hegio: Esurire mihi videre.
Ergasius: Miquidem esurio, non tibi.
Hegio: Tuo arbitratu, facile patior.
Ergasius: Credo, consuetu’s puer.
(866-67)

Hegio: For my part you seem hungry.
Ergasius: I am indeed hungry, but not for you.
Hegio: At your pleasure, I’m easy.
Ergasius: I think, since a boy you’ve been this way.

In addition to humour at the expense of the parasite, Ergasius, there are also sexual wordplay and the suggestion that Hegio is in the habit of taking the passive position.

Hunger and sex are also at work in the following graffito:

esureis et me felas

you are hungry and you suck me off.

‘Me felas’ is, for the reader, para prosdokian, not satisfying the reader’s presumed hunger for food, while at the same time humiliating him by placing him in a passive sexual position. It is possible and probable that the sentiment was a standard and common insult. If so, I suggest it served as the basis for Catullus’ elaboration. For, like the graffito and the exchange between Hegio and Ergasius do, Cat. 21 plays with the ideas of hunger and sex.

The first three lines of the poem mockingly establish Aurelius’ ravening. At this point, though we recognize the mocking tone, we do not

* CIL 11.6721.34, quoted in Adams (note 21) 139.
know what direction the poem will take. The next three establish it, by defining Aurelius’ hunger as sexual. In lines 7 and 8 Catullus then threatens to render Aurelius’ machinations futile with the predictable sexual counter-attack of ‘irrumatio’.27 Were the poem to end here all would be straightforward – Catullus warding off Aurelius by the threat of sexual humiliation. But in lines 9-11 the invective takes an interesting twist, exploiting the ambiguity of ‘esuritio’ and ‘esurire’ by making the meanings ‘hunger for food’ and ‘hunger for sex’ applicable at the same time. Catullus notes that his real concern is not that Aurelius wishes to sodomize his boy, but that he wishes to do so on an empty stomach. It is a perplexing line, but not without parallel. At 1.92.14, Martial expresses a similar sentiment: ‘denique pedica, Mamuriane, satur’ (‘so sodomize, Mamurianus, on a full stomach’). Of it, Bailey cryptically writes ‘supposedly dangerous to health’.

Does ‘pedicans non satur’ reflect ancient belief – sodomizing on an empty stomach is dangerous, but on a full one is not? And if so, dangerous to whom? From the medical perspective, the question seems unanswerable. From the literary one, the precise import of the lines may also be unrecoverable. Nonetheless, an interpretation from literary evidence suggests itself. Since in Catullus’ poem the author’s concerns – sincere or feigned – are for the passive partner’s learning to hunger and thirst, the person he believes to be at risk is the passive partner.

Comparanda for the passive partner’s being harmed by the excessive lust of the active partner are found in two other authors:

κνυζή τις ἡδη καὶ πέπειρα γίνομαι
σὴν διὰ μαργοσύνην.

I am already wrinkled and spoiled
because of your lust.

(Anacr. Fr. 432 PMG)

27 L. Tromaras, ‘Die Aurelius- und Furius-Gedichte Catulls als Zyklus (cc. 11, 15, 16, 21, 23, 24, 26)’, Ermos 85 (1987) 43-44, suggests that Cat. 21 gains in comic force if we imagine that the commendatio of the boy (Cat. 15) has already taken place. Cat. 21, then, heightens the threat against Aurelius. I think they should be read together, but that the two poems build on different dramatic situations: Cat. 15, a parodic commendatio; Cat. 21, Aurelius’ active and open wooing of the boy.

28 It appears that this is an ad hoc explanation on Bailey’s part (note 25).
Thessalian Cleonicus, oh no, oh no! By the sun’s clear light, I did not know you. Poor boy, where have you been? You’re no more than hair and bones. Does my luck possess you, stricken by hard fate? No, I see. Euxitheus snatched you up. For when you came, you bastard, you ogled the beauty doubly.

(Callim. Epigr. 30 Pfeiffer = Anth. Pal. 12.71)

In the first example, the beloved has been aged. In the second the beloved has been physically reduced. In each the ill-health is a result of the active partner’s excessive lust. Although the imagined harm to Juventius, which I discuss in the next paragraph, is different from the harm suffered by those above, nonetheless, the import of Aurelius’ being ‘non satur’ is to indicate that, as in the above two examples, it is his excessive wantonness that poses a threat.

It seems that for Catullus, ‘satur’, a well-fed stomach, may reflect physical and mental well-being and may be an ante quid non when one is to go about doing something in a healthy way. In many of his poems Catullus creates an internal intertextuality of what he views as proper and improper. Cat. 21 forms part of an intertextual nexus of his views on ‘satur’ and its opposite. Healthy desire that is capable of fulfilment seems

29 As far as I know, D. Konstan, ‘An interpretation of Catullus 21’, in C. Deroux (ed.), Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History (Brussels 1979) 214-16, first suggested that ‘satur’ represents Aurelius’ inability to have his sexual desires satisfied. In support he offers Ter. Phorm. 834; Plaut. Amphit. 472-73; Lucr. 4.1102; Cat. 68.83. Add to these Cat. 48.4 and 64.147.

30 Catullus uses ‘irrumatio’ as a threatened attack against those he sees as acting improperly (10.12; 16.1 and 14; 21.8 and 13; 37.8). Conversely, ‘irrumatio’ is what others do when they act in an excessive manner (28.10). ‘Pudicus’ and its opposite are for those whom he views as exhibiting proper, or improper, sexual behavior (15.5; 16.4 and 16.8; 21.12; 29.2 and 10; 42.24; 61.217; 76.24; 110.5). ‘Esurtio’ insults persons as sexually excessive or poor (21.1 and 10; 23.14).
to be the point behind the use of ‘satur’ in poem 32 where Catullus takes pains to tell Ipsitilla that he has eaten when he asks to enjoy her company. Though it does not use ‘non satur’ but ‘tenuis’, poem 89 vilifies Gellius, whose thinness is a manifestation of his promiscuous and incestuous sexual behaviour. Conversely, erotic insatiety may be used to commend rather than condemn. In the kisses poems to Lesbia and to Juventius (7: ‘satis’; 48: ‘satur’), Catullus uses his insatiety, however shameful it may be to himself, to extol the charms of his beloveds. In poem 21, however, ‘non satur’ condemns. For in 9-11, Catullus fears that his *puer delicatus* catch Aurelius’ diseased sexual hunger. Catullus’ worry for the boy is not the point. Rather these lines are concerned with lambasting Aurelius rather than with Juventius’ well-being.

To this end ‘satur’ from line 9 and ‘esurire’ from line 10 reintroduce the idea of Aurelius’ being dominated by his passions. In addition, ‘satur’ calls to mind ‘esuritio’ and the other meaning of ‘esurire’: ‘hunger for food’. By reminding us of Aurelius’ empty belly and of his excessive lust, ‘satur’ and ‘esurire’ together set up the final humiliation of Aurelius:

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quare desine, dum licet pudico,
ne finem facias, sed irrumatus (12-13).
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Continuing the poem’s ambiguous wordplay, ‘ne finem facias’ could refer to any end. From Aurelius’ perspective it would be active sex or, more specifically, climax with the boy. Catullus, however, threatens an end, satisfactory to himself and to the verbal play of the poem: the irrumation of Aurelius. In one sense the insult is similar to ‘esureis et me felas’ or ‘Hungry? Eat me’. The threatened ‘irrumatio’ is dissatisfying in terms of food and humiliating in terms of sex. Equally at work is the vilification along a second sexual line: ‘pater esuritionum’, as noted, characterizes Aurelius as sexually ravenous for active sex. Our analogy thereby changes to something like, ‘Horny? Open your mouth.’ Understood this way, the threatened ‘irrumatio’ offers a sexual end as dissatisfying and humiliating.

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31 This point is also noted by Fitzgerald (note 5) 65-66 and Konstan (note 29) 216.
32 M. Lenchantin, *Il libro di Catullo Veronese* (Turin 1958), also sees the lines as insincere: ‘Abilmente Catullus finge di attribuire il suo disappunto ad altra causa ben diversa da quella che lo affligge.’
as the threatened ‘feeding’ of Aurelius’ empty belly. The insults, then, are three: Catullus (1) calls Aurelius sexually incontinent; (2) threatens a dissatisfying and sexually humiliating ‘feeding’ of his empty belly; (3) and threatens a sexually dissatisfying and humiliating fulfilment of his carnal desires. And so in warding off Aurelius, Catullus would do so in a way that feeds Aurelius’ hunger for sex and his empty belly, in an unexpected, unsatisfying, and sexually humiliating manner.

In conclusion, Aurelius and Furius are similar but not the same. That hunger is commonly used to stigmatize someone as poor or a parasite is not enough to cast Aurelius as either – ‘esuritio’ and ‘esurire’ are used in a variety of ways and of a variety of people. Since Catullus characterizes Aurelius as a promiscuous sodomite, ‘pater esuritionum’ functions to stigmatize him as sexually incontinent and therefore dominated by his passions. In addition, drawing on the ambiguity of two meanings of ‘esuritio’ and ‘esurire’, Catullus makes both work at the same time, feeding Aurelius’ hunger for sex and empty belly, in such a way that neither satisfies his desires (sexual or prandial) and both humiliate him. Such an interpretation places the invective within the traditional Roman view of masculinity: in the rhetoric of the times, appropriate domination is used as an affirmation of healthy masculinity; inappropriate submission, as unhealthy emasculation. Within this context, Catullus can be said to have put Aurelius, excessively indulging his masculine lust, in his submissive place.33

33 For an interpretation of Catullus’ invective that views them within a supposed Mediterranean context of performative aggression, see D. Wray, Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood (Cambridge/New York 2001).
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