Establishing Secure Boundaries for Catullan Terms of Social Distinction

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All who have read Catullus’ “little book” of poems know how scathingly he denigrates his enemies and how proudly he touts the qualities of his friends. His characterizations reflect vividness and precision while simultaneously indicating the polish of a Neoteric poet. Perhaps his *libellus* was read amongst his literary circle by men of discerning tastes and discerning tongues, but the contemporary reader, who has not been raised in a Latin-speaking community, will struggle to comprehend the connotations of new words. They are by no means obvious, and thus must be learned. Therefore, it is crucial to address the nuances of Catullan language, particularly for those words which he uses in his characteristic attacks and praises. This paper will address four such words – *venustus, salsus, lepidus,* and *facetus,* in both positive and negative forms – which are rather similar in meaning, but have distinctions by nature and by usage in Catullus’ work. It will attempt to provide a generalized conception of each word while simultaneously addressing popular, but perhaps inaccurate, interpretations of their meanings.

The translational similarities between *venustus, salsus,* *lepidus,* and *facetus* overlap in all quarters. *Venustus,* according to the Oxford Latin Dictionary, is “attractive in appearance or manner, charming; (of speech, writings, etc) graceful, pretty or
neat.”\textsuperscript{1} Its negative, \textit{invenustus}, is “lacking in charm or beauty, unlovely, unattractive.” Yet \textit{lepidus} means “agreeable, charming, delightful, amusing; (of remarks, books, etc) witty, amusing” while its negative means “lacking grace or refinement.” Although there are minute differences, does this basic idea of charm, grace, and appeal not seem redundant? And if so, what must a reader of Catullus say when he stumbles upon “\textit{illepidum neque invenustum}” (Catullus, 10 ll. 4) or the same phrase in poem 36, ll. 17? Nevertheless, the translations become even more muddled with \textit{facetus}, which means “displaying cleverness of judgement, clever, adept; being witty or facetious.” \textit{Inficetus} means “boorish, insensitive, humorless... not witty or smart.” As it seems, the word overlies \textit{lepidus’} control of wit and amusement. What, then, would “\textit{lepore / incensus, Licinii, facetiosisque}” (Catullus, 50 ll. 7-8) mean, where a connective conjunction differentiates the words? \textit{Salsus} lies in the same boat as \textit{facetus}, meaning in a literary context “salted with humor, witty, funny” while \textit{insulsus} means “unattractive, dull, boring, stupid.” Although each word – and almost every Latin word, in general – has multiple translations, it is important to get a word’s \textit{sense}, which includes particular meanings and nuances subject to an author’s determination. Each word, therefore, will be listed below with its common conceptions, the errors of some of these

\textsuperscript{1} Glare, P G. W. \textit{Oxford Latin Dictionary}. This paper only uses definitions from the Oxford Latin Dictionary.
conceptions, and a satisfactory interpretation for the Catullan corpus.

**Venustus: The Idea of Taste**

Of all the four words, *venustus* appears second-most-often in the Catullan corpus – eleven times in either its positive or negative forms, to be exact. Although every incident factors into the interpretation of this word, poems 12, 22, and 86 especially, are particularly relevant because their adjectival description of characters is rich.

In poem 12, Catullus addresses Marrucinus Asinius, who steals napkins from the table as he dines. Asinius thinks that his action is *salsum* (*hoc salsum esse putas?* Catullus, 12 ll. 4; *salsum* is usually translated as “witty,” but will be addressed in the next section). Catullus, however, calls the napkin-theft a “*sordida res et invenusta*” (ll. 5), or “a vulgar and non-venustus matter.” If the OLD (Oxford Latin Dictionary) definitions are applied here, it is then possible to omit the “lacking in beauty” and “unattractive” notions of the word. If it pertains to beauty and attractiveness exclusively – that is, the dimension of physical aesthetics – the object that Catullus refers to must be aesthetically pleasing or not. Yet Catullus, here, is referring to the act of theft itself. What Asinius thinks is *salsum* in ll. 4 contains no clear antecedent, instead agreeing with the prior main clauses (*manu sinistra / non belle uteris: in ioco atque vino / tollis lincta negligentiorum* ll. 1-3). Furthermore, the *res* in ll. 5 encompasses the whole situation. Unless Catullus finds the
whole matter (res) of Marrucinus Asinius’ deft swipes to be beautiful, which would be a tremendously odd supposition, Catullus’ *venustus* must avoid the realm of physical aesthetics.

In poem 22, Catullus states that “that Suffenus... is *venustus*, well-spoken, and urbane” (*Suffenus iste... homo est venustus et dicax et urbanus* Catullus, 22 ll. 1-2). In keeping with the conclusion from poem 12, Suffenus is not here being called attractive; no, the rest of the poem’s content does not suggest anything even remotely similar. Rather, according to the context that follows several lines later, *venustus* here represents an innate characteristic that can be exemplified or represented in one’s work and surroundings. The quality *venustus* appeared at the very beginning of 22 near *urbanus*, but Catullus rapidly denies that Suffenus retains these characteristics in his poetry. The insult “that pleasant and urbane Suffenus alone seems to, in turn, be a goat-milker or ditch-digger” (*bellus ille et urbanus / Suffenus unus caprimulgus aut fossor / rursus videtur* ll. 9-11) demonstrates this idea well. Since his poetry does not exemplify any literary merit, he instead is sentenced to country-bumpkinhood.

In poem 86, Catullus calls attention to the lack of *venustas* in Quintia (*nam nulla venustas* Catullus, 86 ll. 3), who is otherwise *formosa, candida, longa, recta* (ll. 1-2) – shapely, pale, tall, and straight. Since denying her beauty means that she is not shapely, pale, tall, and straight, Quintia’s lack of *venustas* must refer to something else. The only suitable definition left
from the OLD is “charming” or “beautiful in manner”.

Therefore, although Quintia is quite pretty, she lacks a sort of

refinement. Suffenus also is, in the lyrics of his poetry,

unrefined, and Asinius displays no manners when he swipes

napkins up from the table. The idea of refinement applies in the

other occasions of venustus also. In poem 3, only “rather refined

men” (hominum venustiorum Catullus, 3 ll. 2) can mourn the loss

of a sparrow; in poem 10, the harlot throws Catullus for a loop

because, although she sleeps around, she is not entirely without

refinement (non sane illepidum neque invenustum Catullus, 10 ll.

4); in poem 13, Fabullus is the venuste (Catullus, 13 ll. 6),

“refined one,” who is desirable for dinner merriment. A good

summation of the idea can be found in Robin Seager’s

scholarship: “Fabullus then is venustus because he is a person of

taste and discrimination in matters over which the Veneres

preside. How varied these are is fully displayed: conversation,

the pleasures of the table and friendship, as well as love”

(Seager, 891).

Of course, by no means do all writers agree on that

interpretation. Brian A. Krostenko, in his book The Language of

Social Performance, delves deeply into the origins, etymologies,

and usages of words that indicate social distinction, and venustus


2 It is possible that Catullus may be joking when he says that “rather refined
men” mourn the loss of a sparrow, but the joke would not change the sense of
the word. Rather, if he is mocking the sparrow and thereby mocking the men
who mourn it, they would simply be invenusti: tasteless or unrefined.

3 Seager, Robin. “‘Venustus, Lepidus, Bellus, Salsus’ : Notes on the Language
of Catullus.”
is one of them. Krostenko divides *venustus* into three different categories. Recalling the term’s early influences (Venus and gardening), he composes its semantic structure from female attractiveness, eroticism, and being well-arranged (Krostenko, 40-48). Furthermore, on page 238, he insists that “Catullus has conflated two branches of the word that are normally moved independently”; that is, he has combined eroticism and aesthetic refinement. Yet when Krostenko’s formula of combined eroticism and aestheticism are applied to other poems, such as 12, for example, the idea falls short. When Marrucinus Asinius swipes napkins, does Catullus accuse him because he has failed to be properly arousing or because he has committed a faux pas? Or 22, perhaps: is Suffenus, who appears *venustus* at first glance, erotically appealing? And does the already-attractive Quintia of 86 lack any of Krostenko’s proclaimed “female attractiveness?” Neither would make sense. The Catullan interpretation of *venustus* ought to remain a notion of refinement, taste, and discrimination.

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4 Krostenko, Brian A. *Cicero, Catullus, and the Language of Social Performance*.
5 ibid., “venosto- seems to have drifted, by the way of ‘desirable,’ into ‘attractive’ (42)... *venustus* maintains its connections to erotic attractiveness, particularly that of women, throughout the history of Latin (43)... the connection with gardens may well be partly responsible for the acquisition by *venust(us)* of the sense ‘well-arranged’ (44)...”
6 ibid.
Sal: The Spice of Life

The term sal and its derivatives appear only seven times in the Catullan corpus, but their function is easier to discern than that of venustus. Like with venustus, every incident factors into the interpretation of the word, but that of sal is much more clear-cut, especially through poems 12, 13, and 86.

At its root, sal finds its home in the Catullus corpus through food metaphors. One blatant example is poem 13, in which Catullus tells Fabullus what to bring to dinner: “a pretty girl, and wine, and sale, and all the laughs” (candida puella / et vino et sale et omnibus cachinnis Catullus, 13 ll. 4-5). Garrison suggests that sale here can play on two meanings: salt and wit, which he suggests sensibly, for the context is witty and full of cachinni between friends. However, a mere choice of “wit” does not differentiate sal from facetus. In this case sal would take a very particular OLD definition: not just wit, but the “quality that gives life or character” to a person, action, or object. So if Fabullus literally brings salt to dinner, he provides flavor for the food, but metaphorically, he provides flavor to the tableside conversation.

Poem 86 mentions sal similarly in ll. 4, where Catullus states that Quintia has “not a grain of salt in such a great body” (nulla in tam magno est corpore mica salis Catullus, 86 ll. 4). The salt could refer to one of two options here: on one hand, that there is no spice to her beauty, as the Fordyce commentary suggests.

7 Garrison, Daniel H. The Student's Catullus.
8 Fordyce, Christian J. Catullus. Student's ed.
On the other, if *sal* refers to the spice that gives life to wit, Quintia is a complete airhead with a terrible sense of humor. The latter is a more accurate interpretation, because by saying that there is no spice to her beauty, Fordyce decontextualizes the situation. He focuses on the previous words describing her physical appearance and does not pay respect to the next few lines. But in those lines, Quintia is being compared to Lesbia, whom Catullus admires in his corpus not only for her beauty but for her intelligence and witticisms. Since these are what Quintia lacks, it would be more suitable to translate *sal* as wit again. Moreover, the food metaphor fits rather interestingly here. Catullus addresses none of Quintia’s merits, other than those physical, in the poem whatsoever. Without wit, she shrinks to a mere *corpore* in ll. 4, a body, objectified. Without something to give her “flavor,” she is not worth touching; without any mention of intelligence, she seems like a steak without its spice, nothing but flesh.

Catullus, then, essentially deprives Quintia of a personality. It would be, therefore, appropriate to examine the relationship of *sal*, *salsus* and the like to words that denote personality. That relationship is already being developed in scholarship. Amy Richlin, for example, in regard to an individual’s persona and *sal*,\(^9\) insightfully comments that “seasoning is proper to the right personality” (Richlin, 358). Interestingly enough, in four out of the seven total places in which *sal* or its derivatives appear, a form of *venustus* is not many lines

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\(^9\) Richlin, Amy. “Systems of Food Imagery in Catullus.”
away, and in every occasion where the form is negative, the sal is not realized. In poem 10, after Catullus thinks the scortillum is not entirely “illepidum neque invenustum” (Catullus, 10 ll. 4), he revises his claim because she supposedly has no sal (sed tu insulsa... vivis ll. 33). In poem 12 the association appears with “res... invenusta est” (ll. 5), which is why Asinius is not actually salsum. The same goes for Quintia in 86, who has “nulla venustas... / nulla mica salis” (Catullus, 86 ll. 3-4); in 13, Fabullus, who brings the sale, is also venuste (Catullus, 13 ll. 6). Rosemary Nielsen proclaims about this relationship that sal “has been defined as: ‘the spark that kindles the display of venustas.’”

Perhaps, however, a better definition would be the opposite: that a venustus person brings sal with him. It is literal in poem 22 (Catullus asks Fabullus to bring the sale) but is also quite emphatic in poem 12 because, after Catullus asks whether Asinius thinks he is salsum, he states that the matter itself lacks venustus. That is, it is unrefined, so it cannot bear any wit. Although it is true that wit can bring a character’s personality traits to the surface, only those who possess venustus, as shown above, can demonstrate sal. So while sal does refer to wit, it is intimately involved with tastefulness, which is quite fitting, considering that it literally means “salt.” Sal or salsus should then be translated as “salt” or “salty” for two reasons: in English, the word still retains a connotation of wit and humor; and sal is a quality that gives character, like a spice does to a food. That character is wit, but it

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10 Nielsen, Rosemary M. “CATULLUS AND SAL (POEM 10).”

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is important to recognize that sal triggers wit’s expression, and is not wit itself.

**Lepidus: The Universal Charm**

Unlike *salsus*, *lepidus* is quite difficult to pin down. *Lepidus*, its negatives, and *lepos*, the noun it is derived from, appear twelve times in the entire Catullan corpus, more than each of the other terms addressed in this paper. These twelve instances, however – in poems 1, 6, 10, 12, 16, 32, 36, 50, and 78 – are not enough to specify a precise translation.

Several authors testify to the ambiguity of *lepidus*. Cairns states that “there is a strong temptation to take (it) as having a double reference, both to the physical book and to its contents” (Cairns, 154), then later calls it an “ambiguous adjective” (155).\(^\text{11}\) Seager claims that *lepidus*’ “emphasis may be on either manner or appearance,” then “a combination of mental and physical smartness,” then, in one case, a “stock compliment.”\(^\text{12}\) Fordyce comments that the noun it is derived from, *lepos*, is a “general term, covering any sort of sparkle or grace in the spoken word.”\(^\text{13}\) And Krostenko states that *lepidus*, “as a broad ameliorative… described mainly the response of an observer to a stimulus.”\(^\text{14}\)

If so many critics consider that *lepidus* is ambiguous, the uses of the word ought to be tested against their claim. Poem 1,  

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\(^{11}\) Cairns, Francis. “Catullus I.”


\(^{13}\) Fordyce, Christian J. *Catullus*. pp. 132.

\(^{14}\) Krostenko, Brian A. *Cicero, Catullus, and the Language of Social Performance*. pp. 68.
where Catullus calls his work a “lepidum novum libellum” (Catullus, 1 ll. 1), describing the libellus as an entire unit although it contains many poems, is significant. If the whole book is lepidus, the quality must thereby refer to the whole body of text. According to the OLD, the “lepidum novum libellum” or “new little book” could be agreeable, charming, delightful, amusing, or witty. Whether these qualities attend to the content of the poetry inside or the exterior, physical appearance of the whole unit, is entirely ambiguous. Testing the definitions one by one does not seem to help. The book could be agreeable, charming, delightful, or amusing in its appearance, as “arida modo pumice expolitum” (ll. 2) – “just polished with dry pumice” – seems to suggest. But each of these terms is quite general, as each vaguely refers to pleasure. As for content? Again, because of the generality of these terms, they could certainly refer to the poetry itself. The word “amusement” may also contain some humorous qualities, and surely, no reader can complain that Catullus’ poetry is void of it. If one removable definition remains, it would be “witty”; in poem 16, Catullus mentions that his poems “habent salem ac leporem” (Catullus, 16 ll. 7) – have salt and leporem, where, as mentioned in the previous section, “salt” retains the notion of wit. Using these terms together with the conjunction “ac” seems rather redundant. The poems would “have salt and wit”; they would express wittiness and be witty.

Other instances of the word also suggest that its nature is general. These instances determine its nature not through
addition – that is, each translation lending a different nuance to the term – but through multiple possible translations. In poem 6, for example, Catullus comments: “Flavius, you would want to speak to Catullus about, nor would you be able to be quiet about, your girlfriend, lest she be *illepidae* and inelegant” (Catullus, 6 ll. 1-3). Judging by the context of the poem, where Flavius bounces around on a creaky bed with his feverish harlot of a girlfriend, *illepidus* could refer to both definitions in the OLD. She could be unrefined or ungraceful, for she is, after all, a harlot. The *lepido* at the end of the poem, where Catullus says he wants to “write of (Flavius) and (his) love to heaven with a *lepido* verse” (*volo te ac tuos amores / ad caelum lepido vocare versu* ll. 16-17) acts likewise. His verse does not have any particular associations. It could, without question, be agreeable, charming, delightful, amusing. In either case, the word seems to refer to a blanket notion of pleasure or displeasure.

Perhaps, then, the best translation for *lepids*’ general nature of perceived pleasure or displeasure is “charm.” Charm can encompass amusement, delight, and agreeability. Moreover, it fits every occasion of the word: in poem 1, a “charming book” (*lepium novum libellum* ll. 1); in poem 6, an “uncharming and inelegant girl” (*illepidae atque inelegantes* ll. 2) and a “charming verse” (*lepido vocare versu* ll. 17); in poem 10, a harlot that does not seem “excessively uncharming or inelegant” (*scortillum… non sane illepidum neque invenustum* ll. 3-4); in poem 36, Lesbia thinks she “vows charmingly to the gods” (*lepide vovere*...
dis 11. 10); and so on and so forth. These examples should cover that “charm” applies to and fits the general notions of books (whether physical or textual), verses, humans, and vows.

**Facetus: The Clever Judge**

Like the sal family, facetus is a term that appears a total of six times in the entire Catullan corpus. Even more frugal is the quantity of poems it appears in – a total of five – 12, 22, 36, 43, and 50.

When Catullus first uses the word in poem 12, he gives it a sense of intelligent judgement. He calls Marrucinus Asinius’ brother, Pollio, “leporum differtus puer ac facetiarum” (12 ll. 8-9), or a “boy full of charms and of facetiae.” While judging Asinius’ napkin swipes, Pollio, full of facetiae, is to be trusted (crede ll. 6). Why? The rationale behind the statements arguing for his facetus nature is that he “tua furta vel talento / mutari velit” (ll. 7); he “would like (Asinius’) thefts to be exchanged even for a talent.” Garrison, in reference to this line, comments concisely that a talent is “a lot of Greek money.” In light of this analysis and the host of definitions from the OLD (displaying cleverness of judgement, clever, adept; (facetiae) being witty or facetious), the first two translations fit best. Pollio’s estimate of the price of Asinius’ crime provides him cleverness or good judgement. It is important to note, however, that this judgement does not merely apply to matters of intelligence, but also to humor; Asinius thinks he is funny, but Pollio understands that he

is not. He thus has a higher understanding of humor and can capably judge its quality.

The intelligence or cleverness of a *facetus* individual gains support from a few other poems, particularly those that reference rustic land. The first is poem 22, where Catullus accuses Suffenus of literary ineptitude by characterizing him as “*infaceto est infacetior rure*” (Catullus, 22 ll. 14), or “less clever than the dim-witted countryside.” The claim pays respect to how he “changes and is so greatly inconsistent” (*tantum abhorret ac mutat* ll. 11). Although Suffenus is tasteful, well-spoken, and urbane, and although his poetry has superior physical characteristics,\(^\text{16}\) he has terrible judgement when it comes to verse. For this reason, Catullus terms him a “goat-milker or a ditch-digger” (*caprimulgus aut fossor* ll. 10). Both of these rural professions require repetitive physical labor and profess no mental activity. A goat-milker squeezes teats all day, mindless of his social class, his attractiveness, or his wit; a ditch-digger pounds a shovel into the ground endlessly without engaging the mind’s creative faculties. Neither one needs to be particularly clever. So when Catullus refers to Suffenus as “*infacetior… rure*,” he equates the man with a country dullard.

\(^{16}\) Catullus, 22 ll. 6-8. Suffenus’ poetry’s physical characteristics: “*cartae regiae, novi libri, / novi umbilici, lora rubra membranae, / derecta plumbo et pumice omnia aequata*…” It is made up of royal sheets, new books, new scroll knobs, red leather straps, skins, and is all ruled with lead and leveled with pumice.
The same goes for poems 36 and 43. In poem 36, Catullus addresses the work of Volusius as “pleni ruris et inficetiarum,” (Catullus, 36 ll. 19) or “full of the countryside and dim-witted things.” In other words, Volusius’ poetry expresses his lack of the quality *facetus*, for what he produces seems like what a country dullard would write. In poem 43, Catullus asks his addressee, Ameana, whether the province (according to the OLD, a territory outside of Italy and therefore outside of Rome’s city life) says that she is pretty (*ten provincia narrat esse bellam?* Catullus, 43 ll. 6). Through this language, he associates her with dim-witted rusticity. In the final line, Catullus proclaims “*o saeclum insapiens et infacetum!*” (ll. 8). Here, he calls the current generation unwise and dim-witted; they are analogous to the province, which apparently suits itself with an unattractive, lower-class girl. These fools are not capable of judging the qualities that make a beautiful woman.

Other authors seem to agree with this interpretation of *facetus* as a reference to cleverness and intelligence. Krostenko claims that the word is linked by etymology to *fax*, a torch, and expresses a “kind of ‘bright flash’ or ‘smooth polish’… in the ‘brilliance of apt or clever speech or the intelligence it suggests.”17 Mark F. Williams, moreover, claims that “Catullus’ use of the phrase *tuo lepore / incensus, Licini,*

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facetiisque \(^{18}\) ...connotes a strong intellectual, rather than erotic, friendship.”\(^ {19}\) Even Fordyce, when explaining the infacetum of poem 43, mentions that Catullus’ society “has only scorn for the dull, the insensitive, the clumsy and the provincial... the infacetus is the dreary person who takes things seriously.”\(^ {20}\)

Therefore, on account of analysis as well as the contributions of several scholars, it would be suitable to translate facetus as “clever.”

**Concluding Remarks**

While the Oxford Latin Dictionary is a valuable asset for translating Latin, it is important, especially with Neoteric poets such as Catullus, to understand the nuances of many different words. Venustus, or “tasteful”; sal, or “salt”; lepidus, or “charming”; and facetus, or “clever”; are but a few of the words that a poem’s meaning might hinge upon. There are many others, such as bellus and urbanus, which need investigation. Regardless of the word, there can be no entirely conclusive translation; even if every single instance of the word’s usage has been investigated, a translation is, inevitably, an interpretation. Words take on different uses with different authors, and different readers provide different interpretations. This paper will hopefully provide insight as both a meta-analysis of scholarly

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\(^{18}\) Catullus, 50 ll. 7-8. “...kindled, Licinius, by your charm and clever deeds.”

\(^{19}\) Williams, Mark F. “Catullus 50 and the Language of Friendship.”

sources and a collection of poetic interpretations. Catullus’ poetry is so polished that it deserves the attention.
Bibliography


