

## BOOK REVIEW

*Silence in Catullus*. By BENJAMIN ELDON STEVENS. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013. Pp. x + 338. Paper, \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-299-29664-3.

“Silence” is not the first word that comes to mind when thinking of Catullus’ poetry, where even the beds shout and the doors gossip, but Benjamin Stevens’ *Silence in Catullus* suggests that the gaps in Catullan speech not only are significant but constitute a “poetics of silence” that reveals how much humans depend on the constant chatter of language for their very existence. Stevens’ readings are frequently insightful, drawing innovative connections between familiar poems and those either less studied (e.g. the Gellius cycle) or too often viewed in isolation from the rest of the corpus (e.g. the poems on the brother’s death). The book’s style is somewhat convoluted and the desultory way Stevens moves between relevant theoretical work can at times be daunting, but patient readers will find much of value and interest in Stevens’ work, which contributes to many ongoing discussions in Catullan studies.

Central to Stevens’ analysis is the idea that the silence of others — direct addressees, friends and rivals under discussion, and even the poet himself — is a necessary prerequisite for the voice of the poet’s speaker to emerge, and, indeed, that the speaker constructs people in the poems as silent in order to enable his own vocalized reality. In chapter one Stevens traces how Flavius’ apparent reticence to talk about his girlfriend in poem 6 gives the speaker breathing room to voice his own fiction about their erotic activities, fuelled by synesthetic cues: the sights, smells, and movements of inanimate objects in Flavius’ bedroom all scream “sex.” Flavius’ silence allows the speaker’s non-auditory senses and vivid imagination to (re)construct the story (whether true or not, at least tantalizingly outrageous).

This notion runs through many of Stevens’ readings, particularly in the socio-erotic poems (the subjects of chapters two and three), where Stevens deftly shows how the speaker makes himself the arbiter of good and bad speech through sexualized silences: the kisses in poems 5 and 7, although occluding the lovers’ speech, are more meaningful than the wagging *mala lingua* of grumpy old men, whereas Gellius’ performance of *fellatio* in poem 74 allows the speaker to delight in creating

or carrying on the gossip that is on everyone's lips. Stevens draws speculative but intriguing links between *irrumatio*, which imposes sexualized silence on others, and *rumor*, which can only come about when its targets have been silenced, teasing out well the complex interplay between speech, silence, sex, and poetry in poem 16. Silence, he shows, can become an opportunity where an "unspoken backstory, whether real or fictional, may be spoken aloud by the innovative poet in outrageous violations of traditional linguistic taboos" (82). But in chapter three Stevens also calls attention to how poetry functions as an act of social performance that requires the speaking voices of its readers for its continuation. Even a poet who successfully fills his and others' silences within his poetry must face the possibility that his work, mute in its materiality, faces the inevitable silence of death because it relies on mortal speakers and readers.

The "natural silence" of death serves as the focus of the book's second section (chapters four and five), where Stevens explores the brother's demise as a jarring event intimately tied to Catullan (meta)poetics. Whereas the sociocultural silences Stevens examines in the prior chapters enable the production of fiction, "the natural silence of death seems to shut down the poetic imagination by being too real: there can be no adequate description of it, nor of course is there any response from it" (125). In considering the speaker's reactions to his brother's death in poems 65, 68, and 101 and the *consolatio* to Calvus on Quintilia's death in 96, Stevens' readings draw connections between the two basic emotions latent in "to want"—to crave and to lack—and in the process point out interesting relationships between the socio-erotic desire in the rest of the collection and the futile yearning to speak with the irrevocably silenced dead in these poems.

"Feminized silence" occupies the book's final section (chapters six and seven), in which Stevens examines how the voices of women and of others cast in feminine roles operate in a world where masculine discourse traditionally suppresses feminine speech. Building on excellent recent work in this area, Stevens traces some of the many ways in which Catullus figures feminine voices in his work, focusing especially on Ariadne in poem 64, Attis in 63, and the speaker-as-Sappho in 51. These feminized characters, he argues, "serve as analogues for the poet's own experience of silence" (254) and vocalize Catullus' anxieties about and struggles with the limitations posed by poetic speech. For him, the imminent silence that constantly hangs over feminine language users living in a cultural context dominated by masculine discourse highlights "a fear of language use proving ineffectual, unmeaningful, or, perhaps most precisely, unintentionally consequential" (239). Stevens' occasional equation of the poet with his fictional speakers in

these chapters is not always convincing, but this point notwithstanding, his analysis of gendered speech and silences here is thoughtful and elucidates the many complexities, ironies, and problems inherent in such ventriloquism of feminized voices by male users of language.

In sum, Stevens' book offers a valuable addition to scholarship on Catullus and Latin poetry. By calling attention to what is not, should not, or simply cannot be said in poetic speech, it reveals paradoxical but intimate relationships between the words we say and the silences surrounding them that give them meaning.

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