

Catullus 33: Helping Out in the Family Business?

O furum optime balneariorum
 Vibenni pater et cinaede fili
 (nam dextra pater inquinatio,
 culo filius est voracior),
 cur non exilium malasque in oras 5
 itis? quandoquidem patris rapinae
 notae sunt populo, et natis pilosas,
 fili, non potes asse venditare.

Unusually for Catullus, there are no serious textual or exegetical problems in this little squib, but I have something to add on the meaning.¹

Commentators note that the Vibennii are a well-matched pair in that they are (at least by ancient standards) equally disgusting in entirely different ways, and that Catullus uses the ‘wrong’ adjectives to describe each, making the father’s criminal organ filthier (*dextra . . . inquinatio*, 3) and the son’s greedier (*culo . . . voracior*, 4), when their particular vices would be more naturally expressed the other way around.²

Commentators also note that clothes-stealing was a serious problem at ancient baths.³ Although the poem does not spell it out, I think we are to imagine that the Younger Vibennius has also been practicing his trade at the baths. The ancient baths were not just known for assignations: sex, both paid and unpaid, often took place right in the bath-houses, and not always in rooms set aside for the purpose.⁴

Sex in the baths must have been quite distracting to the other patrons, most of all to whoever was engaged with the Younger Vibennius himself, and distraction is just what the Elder Vibennius needed for his own work. Like picking pockets, clothes-stealing must

¹ The last line contains one of the best inadvertent bilingual puns I’ve seen, though better for Americans than for Britons: the Younger Vibennius can’t sell his ass for an *as*.

² In his headnote on the poem, John Godwin (*Catullus: the Shorter Poems*, Aris & Phillips, 1999) notes that the father-son relationship is mentioned three times: 2, 3-4, and 6-8

³ Later commentators still refer the reader to Robinson Ellis’ note (*A Commentary on Catullus*, 1889).

⁴ Garrett Fagan compiles the evidence: *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor, 1999), 34-36),

have involved misdirection and distraction as well as boldness and speed of escape, so the father at least would have been more successful in his own line of work if his son were working the same baths in his own way.

Catullus' suggestion that father and son leave Rome together (5-6) is therefore appropriate not only because they are disgusting in different ways, and because both are losing income, the father because he is becoming known as a thief and prospective victims are warier (6-7), the son because of advancing age (7-8), but also (I suggest) because the son's imminent retirement will make the father's all the more necessary.⁵

⁵ It may even be that the son's decreasing charms have led to the father's notoriety by reducing the amount of distraction he can provide.