It Takes an O to Make a Ring: Catullus 50.21

S. J. Heyworth emends laedere to ludere in Catullus 44.3, and his argument is so concise it’s easier to quote than to paraphrase:¹

“44.2-3

nam te esse Tiburtem autumant, quibus non est cordi Catullum laedere.

The sense ‘irritate, vex’ is perhaps mild enough for this context; but when one notes that laedere has arisen from corruption of ludere at 17.1 (and as a variant in R at 50.5), it is tempting to think that ludere (‘mock’) should be restored here too.”

It seems to me we should make the same change in the last line of Catullus 50:

nunc audax cave sis, precesque nostras,
oramus, cave respuas, ocelle,
ne poenas Nemesis reposcat a te. 20
vemens est dea: laedere hanc caveto.

. . . . . .

nunc audax cave sis, precesque nostras,
oramus, cave respuas, ocelle,
ne poenas Nemesis reposcat a te. 20
vemens est dea: ludere hanc caveto.

2 invicem Sabellicus : in meis OGR : in tuis Schwabe
19 respuas Trappes-Lomax : despus OGR
21 vemens est McKie : est vemens OGR  ludere scripsi : laedere OGR

Though the meaning is not entirely clear – Heyworth proposes a lacuna before 18 – the poet seems to be saying that poetry may be a trivial game, at least in some circumstances, but friendship is sacred. Mocking friendship will attract the wrath of Nemesis. The repeated verb would contrast the innocent play of exchanging impromptu verses with dangerous disrespect for Nemesis.

Finally, we should probably follow John M. Trappes-Lomax in preferring the forms loedere and in vicem to ludere and invicem,2 but I have kept the traditional spellings here so readers may set aside the orthographic questions while contemplating the change (or rather non-change) of verb in the last line. However, I could not resist using a title that implies loedere rather than ludere.

\[^2\] Catullus: A Textual Reappraisal (Swansea, 2007), on 44.3 (page 116) and 50.2 (124) respectively.

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