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"Every Time I Write a Rhyme / These People Think It's a Crime": Persona Problems in Catullus and Eminem

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ABSTRACT

This essay interprets Eminem's song, "Criminal" (2000, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, Track 18), as a Catullan project in establishing distance between the poet and poetic persona, accomplished through Catullan invective. Drawing upon pedagogical experience, I argue that Catullus (a Roman poet of the 1st Century BCE) and Eminem use analogous rhetorical tactics and structures to challenge accusations (real or imagined) of poor character stemming from their poetry. Catullus and Eminem vociferously articulate a separation of art from artist, using common transgressive poetics. Each poet disavows his own self-constructed stance of authenticity with similar threats of violence and postures of hyper-masculine dominance. In so doing, Catullus and Eminem challenge interpretative practices they elsewhere seem to assume and even encourage. Finally, I suggest that the programmatic poems of Catullus and Eminem construct similar readerly personae and that, ultimately, this confluence suggests not only a common poetics but also common discursive strategies in ancient and modern audiences.

Keywords: Catullus, Eminem, hip hop, sexuality and gender studies, transgressive poetry, poetic personae, classical reception studies, poetics

I. INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I taught an intensive three-week seminar entitled "From Homer to Hip Hop" (a title I borrowed from Daniel Banks' essay by the same name). A group of twenty-three advanced undergraduate students and I studied ancient Greek and Roman poetry and contemporary rap music alongside one another for three hours a day, five days a week. It was a lot of fun, and my students were truly excellent. The nuanced analyses they performed and the connections they drew between ancient and modern poetics through such lenses as oral culture, gender, race, class, politics, violence, and intertextuality were almost unswervingly impressive. There was, however, one noteworthy exception: the very notions of literary personae and poetic masks presented major conceptual challenges in the classroom, even though we devoted an entire class period to the topic early in course. My students consistently fell back upon biographical interpretations of hip hop and struggled to separate rap from rapper, although they appeared perfectly capable of performing this discursive activity with first-person, seemingly confessional ancient poets like Archilochus, Sappho, Catullus, Sulpicia, Horace, and Juvenal. When pressed to explain what accounted for this difference, students answered that they knew fewer biographical details about ancient poets than modern rappers and were thus ill-equipped to evaluate autobiographical authenticity in the classical material. The logical inference to be drawn is that, were Sappho and Juvenal *their* celebrities, these students would have relapsed into the same biographical lines of interpretation they brought to bear on hip hop.

Why were my students so spellbound by authenticity, and why did they struggle so much to distinguish art from artist and literary convention from biographical reality? How might the pairing of classical poetry with rap music illuminate the rhetorical strategies by which both ancient and modern poets construct their poetic personae, especially in satiric verse? And what might this pairing teach modern audiences about the discursive approaches they apply to texts in multiple media and genres?

Addressing these questions, Ralph Rosen and Donald Marks demonstrate commonalities between ancient satiric verse and transgressive rap music, while Rosen and Victoria Baines develop these observations further with a case study of the Roman poet Juvenal's *Satires* and "The Way I Am," a song by Eminem (a controversial rap star and Alexander Severus doppelgänger). Rosen and Baines show that the satiric programs of both Juvenal and Eminem require a rhetorical stance of autobiographical authenticity from the poetic persona and that each poet constructs his persona through a highly stylized, *indignatio*-driven compulsion to spontaneous composition. In short, despite the obvious cultural and temporal gaps between Juvenal and Eminem, and perhaps also a perceived aesthetic divide between "high" and "low" or "popular" culture, Juvenal and Eminem share a common satiric poetics that extends far back to antiquity.[1]

Building on the work of Rosen, Baines, and Marks, I here reexamine Eminem's construction of his poetic persona in relation to Latin poetry. This essay interprets Eminem's hit song, "Criminal" (2000, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, Track 18), as a Catullan project in establishing distance between the poet and poetic persona, accomplished through Catullan invective.[2] Much as Rosen and Baines argue of Eminem's relationship with Juvenal, Catullus, and Eminem "draw on a common poetics, especially when it comes to their strategies for presenting the satirical self and for constructing a very specific relationship with their audiences" (105). While Catullus does not write satire in its strict generic definition, much of his insult poetry can at least be understood to be satiric. Charles Martin describes Catullus as "both satirist and lyricist" (xiv), and the same is, of course, true of Eminem.[3]

My intent, however, is not to rehash the studies of Rosen, Marks, and Baines using different poems and songs; their convincing arguments hardly demand the presentation of additional supporting evidence. Rather, I wish to analyze two programmatic and transgressive poems that abdicate the rhetorical foundations on which their satire depends. I show that Eminem's "Criminal" negates the stance of authenticity for which Rosen and Baines argue and that the song's program to dismantle the imagined conflation of the poet with his

poetic persona maps neatly onto the strategies of Catullus 16.

Eminem's "Criminal" is one of his most transgressive songs, and Catullus 16 is a poem so infamously explicit in its vulgarity that, "until recently, English as forthright as the Latin could never be printed" (Winter 257; Hexter 276-77). In ways that remind us of contemporary debates over transgressive lyrics in hip hop, Latin invective poetry and its sexual imagery have long invited censorship as "too gross for our present notions of propriety" (Williams 289). So it is that Karl Harrington reads Poem 16 as a marker of "human depravity" containing "unspeakable things," while offering a "hardly tenable … lame defense" of its own "indefensibly risqué" obscenity (83-84; one can only imagine what Harrington might say of Eminem). In addition to its remarkable capacity to maintain shock value for two millennia, Catullus 16 stands out as an important piece of literary criticism, vociferously articulating a separation of art from artist. As Donald Lateiner observes, Catullus' programmatic Poem 16 is "the earliest protest we have against the biographical fallacy, the confusion of the poet and his poetry's *persona*" (16; Batsone). Eminem's "Criminal" is similarly a program piece, which undermines the rapper's own rhetorical self. These are two poems that speak directly to the interpretive strategies my students displayed in the classroom, strategies which the poetry of Catullus and Eminem seems to assume and elsewhere even to encourage.

Catullus and Eminem use analogous rhetorical tactics and structures to challenge accusations (real or imagined) of poor character stemming from their poetry. Each poet disavows his own self-constructed stance of authenticity with similar threats of violence and postures of hyper-masculine dominance. Finally, I suggest that the programmatic poems of Catullus and Eminem construct similar readerly personae and that, ultimately, this confluence suggests not only a common poetics but also common discursive strategies in ancient and modern audiences. The stakes of authorial personae our understanding of them are high. These stakes extend beyond the specific genres of Latin invective and hip hop to bigger questions of how we approach, recognize, and interpret art, as well as to issues of censorship and to moral—even legal—questions concerning the relationships between artists and their creative output. Thus, I conclude by turning to a recent trend in jurisprudence, in which transgressive lyrics have been used as confessional inculpatory evidence to prosecute their authors for actual crimes.

Fair warning: this essay contains explicit lyrics.

II. THE "I"S OF THE POETS

As Rosen and Baines have shown of Juvenal's *Satires* and Eminem's "The Way I Am," the satiric programs of Eminem and Catullus feature "a continual interplay between claims of artless spontaneity, highly self-conscious poeticizing, and oscillating postures of abjection and arrogance" (113).[4] Even though "Criminal" and Catullus 16 are stylized poems, composed in meter and premeditatedly given material preservation for release in conventional formats to a broad audience, the transgressive poetics of both Eminem and Catullus place the poet himself at the center of his poetry and depend on generic postures of immediacy, indignation, spontaneity, and authenticity.

These strategies are on display in "Criminal"'s second verse, an "apologetic program" in which the song's narrator claims autobiographical stimuli–both natural and external–compel him to write his indignant poetry.[5]

> The mother did drugs, hard liquor, cigarettes and speed
>
> The baby came out, disfigured ligaments, indeed
>
> It was a seed who would grow up just as crazy as she

Don't dare make fun of that baby, 'cause that baby was me

I'm a criminal, an animal caged who turned crazed

But how the fuck you supposed to grow up when you weren't raised?

So as I got older and I got a lot taller

My dick shrunk smaller, but my balls got larger

I drink malt liquor to fuck you up quicker

Than you'd wanna fuck me up for saying the word ******

My morals went (*pffft*) when the president got oral

Sex in his Oval Office on top of his desk off his own employee

Now, don't ignore me, you won't avoid me

You can't miss me: I'm white, blonde-haired, and my nose is pointy

I'm the bad guy who makes fun of people that die

In plane crashes and laughs as long as it ain't happened to him

Slim Shady, I'm as crazy as Eminem and Kim combined

As Rosen and Marks write of Greek and Roman poetic tendencies, Eminem ostensibly feels "compelled to adopt a didactic explanation of the more offensive elements of [his] work" (905). The rapper places himself at the center of his poetry and invokes his own autobiography to justify his authentic compulsion to write the sorts of verses he does. (The artist blames his mother, and Kim was Eminem's wife at the time.) The title of Eminem's album, *The Martial Mathers LP*, reinforces this notion that we are listening to the authentic reflections of the artist, because the title is eponymous with Eminem's legal name and followed *The Slim Shady LP*, which is explicitly named after a trickster alter ego.[6]

This stance of authenticity is indicative of Eminem's work. Marcia Alesan Dawkins argues that "Eminem uses additional alter egos to increase the distance between himself and his art, which is another dimension of his aura." (Dawkins invokes Walter Benjamin's definition of "aura" as the distance between a work of art and its audience.) Despite this technique of distancing via personae, Dawkins recognizes that Eminem's art postures an authentic unity of poet and poetry: Eminem "and his publicity team mechanically reproduce the aura, tether it to his personae and market art and artist as one fixed commodity." In her analysis of Eminem's music video for the song, "The Real Slim Shady," Dawkins holds that the "video suggests that Eminem's art only emerges when his authenticity is threatened … Eminem, artist and his artistry, remains one unique unit." For Dawkins, this stance of authenticity is essential to "Eminem, a brand consisting of artist and his product, exhibits an aura that cannot be separated from its packaging. The packaging emphasizes Eminem's uniqueness, that he and his art are one" (Dawkins 470-73; Benjamin).

Catullus 16 relies upon these same postures of authenticity and immediacy by directly addressing the poet's alleged critics by name:

Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo,

Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi,
qui me ex versiculis meis putastis,
quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum.
nam castum esse decet pium poetam
ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est;
qui tum denique habent salem ac leporem,
si sunt molliculi ac parum pudici,
et quod pruriat incitare possunt,
non dico pueris, sed his pilosis
qui duros nequeunt movere lumbos.
vos, quod milia multa basiorum
legistis, male me marem putatis?
pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo.[7]
I will sodomize you and fuck you in the mouth,
cocksucker Aurelius and butt-boy Furius,
who thought me unchaste from my little verses,
because they are a little soft.
For it is right that the pious poet himself be chaste,
but his little verses need not be;
verses which then have wit and charm,
if they are a little soft and salacious
and can incite a lustful itch,
I don't mean in boys, but in those hairy old men
who can't get their cocks up.
You, because you've read about my many thousands of kisses,
you think me unmanly?
I will sodomize you and fuck you in the mouth.

As he does here with Aurelius and Furius, Catullus frequently names himself and many of his associates

and addressees throughout his poetic corpus. As a result, while they have been tempered in recent decades, biographical approaches to Catullus have been and remain ever-present. Poem 16 alleges an audience deeply enmeshed in this approach–the poem's narrator suggests that Aurelius and Furius accuse Catullus of unmanliness "because you've read about my many thousands of kisses" (*quod milia multa basiorum / legistis*, 12-13), likely in reference to the Lesbia poems 5 and 7, although it is also possible that Catullus refers here to the Juventius poems.[8] As Rosen and Marks suggest of gangsta rap and other forms of subjective poetry, the poetry of Catullus and Eminem "insists on the pretense that the 'I' of its lyrics is the actual poet."[9]

Catullus' satiric elements depend not only upon a charade of authenticity but also upon a stance of spontaneity. Catullus' poems brim with imperatives, vocatives, and threats of poetic harangues, implying an unmediated stream of off-the-cuff verse. For example:

> quare aut hendecasyllabos trecentos / exspecta, aut mihi linteum remitte (Catullus 12.10-11)
>
> Therefore, either expect three-hundred haranguing verses, or give me back my napkin.

And the more transgressive:

> quare desine, dum licet pudico, / ne finem facias, sed irrumatus (Catullus 21.12-13).
>
> Therefore, stop [pursuing my boy] while you still can chastely, lest you accomplish your goal, but with a dick in your mouth.

This feigned spontaneity and heavy use of colloquialism effect a stance of authenticity, and Kenneth Quinn describes Catullus' style as "the Latin of conversation … a literary idiom that preserves the illusion of the poet's ordinary speaking voice" (*The Poems*, xxvii). As Charles Martin outlines in the preface to his *Catullus*, Catullus appeals "to us by virtue of his passion, his wit, and the *immediacy* with which he delivers both to us." For Martin, this immediacy gives the "popular" impression of "unimpeded spontaneity" (xiii, my own emphasis).

III. PERSONA PROBLEMS AND THE INVECTIVE OF MANHOOD

As Roland Mayer writes generally of Latin poets, "they clearly felt that a good number of their readers would take the poems to be true statements about their own lives" (66). With respect to Catullus and his literary milieu, Mayer argues that the ancients, including Catullus, were fundamentally incapable of conceiving of a literary persona in a way that disassociated the poet's life from his art (67).[10] Thus, Diskin Clay suggests that it is "a hard won distinction" in modern classical scholarship "that there is a difference between the poet *of* a poem and the poet *in* a poem" (17). Nevertheless, Catullus and Eminem abdicate their own constructions of narratological authenticity.

Lines 3-4 of Catullus 16 accuse Furius and Aurelius of being irresponsible readers: "You thought *me* indecent because of my little verses, because they are a little effeminate and unchaste." Catullus explains: "For the pious poet himself should be chaste, but his little verses need not be" (5-6). Given the generic and aesthetic distances between Catullus' neoteric poetry and Eminem's transgressive hip hop, *mollitia* (softness or effeminacy) is not the specific charge from which Eminem attempts to distance himself in the lyrics of "Criminal." (I would argue, however, that the specter of "softness" lurks ever-present behind Eminem's construction of gender; see Keller "Shady Agonistes.") Nevertheless, Eminem proposes a similar distinction between art and life, expressing frustration that this differentiation needs to be made at all. "Criminal" opens with the proem:

A lot of people ask me stupid fuckin' questions

A lot of people think that what I say on a record

Or what I talk about on a record

That I actually do in real life or that I believe in it

Or if I say that I wanna kill somebody

That I'm actually gonna do it or that I believe in it

Shortly thereafter in the song's first verse, Eminem rhetorically muses, "How many records you expecting to sell / After your second LP sends you directly to jail?" Later in the song, Eminem quips, "'Cause every time I write a rhyme / These people think it's a crime / … I guess I'm a criminal!" Catullus 16 and "Criminal" each present themselves as direct responses to critics who take offense to violent, vulgar, and/or sensuous poetry. Tying these lines of Catullus and Eminem together is the concern, perhaps even frustration, that their own stances of spontaneity and authenticity have been too successful; audiences are allegedly failing to separate the poet from his poetry.

Rosen and Baines note that "the conceit … that satirists should worry about legal recrimination for their work" was a classical satiric convention even before Juvenal. Eminem here taps into a "common satirical stance in which the poet simultaneously aggrandizes and restrains himself ('my satire is so incredibly effective that I can't really say it without fear of the law …')" (113n17). Especially in light of these commonplace generic postures, it is remarkable that Catullus and Eminem reject their own self-created stances of authenticity. Catullus and Eminem respond to their detractors with explicit disavowals of autobiographical lines of interpretation and each dares his critics to censure (and censor?) him yet again.[11] Much like Catullus' infamous '*Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*' (lines 1 and 14), Eminem employs a ring composition of transgressive yet ludic threats of violence.[12] Eminem's proem continues. "Well, shit, if you believe that, Then I'll kill you / You know why? 'Cause I'm a criminal!"

Like Catullus, the rapper presents himself as a vindictive, dangerous person who should not be crossed and he presents his violent threat in direct address to his targeted critics. This self-presentation and its ironies are further developed later in the song with an interlude/skit in which Eminem pretends to rob a bank, ostensibly shooting the teller in the process:

[Robber] Aight look, just go up in that motherfucker, get the motherfucking money,
and get the fuck up outta there

[Eminem] Alright

[Robber] I'll be right here waiting on you

[Eminem] Aight

[Robber] Yo, Em

[Eminem] What?!

[Robber] Don't kill nobody this time

[Eminem] Awwright … god damn, this motherfucker gets on my fuckin' nerves!
[*whistling*] How you doin'?

[Teller] Hi, how can I help you?

[Eminem] Yeah I need to make a withdrawal

[Teller] Okay

[Eminem] Put the fucking money in the bag, bitch, and I won't kill you!

[Teller] What? Oh my God, don't kill me!

[Eminem] I'm not gonna kill you, bitch, quit looking around

[Teller] Don't kill me! I've got two kids at home don't kill me!

[Eminem] I said I'm not gonna fucking kill you

[Teller]: Don't kill me!

[Eminem]: Hurry the fuck up! [*Gunshot*] Thank you!

The scene plays out as something of an initiation scene, not only into hard crime but also into shifty genre of satire. Despite his assertions of criminality for the song's previous three and a half minutes, Eminem assumes the role of the naïf, the inexperienced criminal told not to do anything stupid like kill someone (which he does in a moment of panic). Just before the skit, Eminem suggests that Dr. Dre, another transgressive hip hop artist and a mentor to Eminem, was mistaken to allow him to play with guns:

Oh, that's Dre with an AK to his face

Don't make me kill him too and spray his brains all over the place

I told you, Dre, you should've kept that thang put away

I guess that'll teach you not to let me play with it, eh?

Eminem's fictive crime and his artistry are explicitly constructed in intricate relationships with generic antecedents. At every step, Eminem abdicates morality in his self-presentation of unconstrained spontaneity, yet reminds us that he is a lyricist trained by and participating in a rich literary tradition.

"Criminal"'s last verse antagonistically concludes:

You motherfuckin' chickens ain't brave enough

To say the stuff I say, so just tape it shut

Shit, half the shit I say, I just make it up

To make you mad, so kiss my white naked ass

And if it's not a rapper that I make it as

I'ma be a fuckin' rapist in a Jason mask

Like Catullus, Eminem couples his parting shot with rearticulated frustration with the conflation of poet with poetic persona and he disavows the genuineness of his insult poetry. "Half the shit I say, I just make it up" reiterates that we take Eminem's self-presentation and satiric lampoons as authentic and autobiographical

at our own peril.[13] Moreover, the line illustrates the challenges inherent in such a discursive approach; if Eminem fictionalizes half of his lyrics, the implication is that half *are* authentic presentations of self. But which are which and how can the listener distinguish with absolute confidence? This challenge is borne out through Eminem's vocal intonation throughout the song. Eminem's loud, growling overemphasis of the word "criminal" evokes a menacing, threatening self-identification even as it calls attention to the irony implied by the statement.

In light of these ontological uncertainties, "just tape it shut" attempts to silence critics, recalling the imposed silence implied by Catullus' *irrumabo*.[14] Also like Catullus 16, "Criminal" closes with a threat of sexual violence and forced penetration. Eminem here recalls Catullus' Priapic pose, which adopts "the brutal, violent attitude of Priapus toward" detractors "subject to rape."[15] James Uden suggests that Catullus adopts this Priapic pose satirically, and the same is true of Eminem: both poems use their Priapic stances to represent a "farcically boorish and unsophisticated" sexuality (2). Much like "Criminal"'s threat of physical violence in the proem, the final two lines join this threat of rape to the lyrical art of the poem itself. This strategy mirrors Catullus' invective in Poem 16, and the yoking of Priapic satire to metaliterary reflections on poetry is hardly haphazard.

Uden argues (5):

> What gives Priapic poetry its double edge here is that its native tendency towards artistically self-conscious impersonation makes it a perfect generic form for critique, in that it encourages its audience to perceive a disjunction between the narrative *ego* and the poet himself. When Catullus "impersonates Priapus," he is less assuming Priapus' hyperphallicism for himself than exploiting Priapus' own generic propensity for self-critique.

If "Criminal"'s threat of rape is both satiric and embedded within programmatic statements about the rapper's own lyrics and their reception, Uden's analysis of Catullus extends to Eminem. As disturbing as the imagery of "Criminal"'s final threat of rape might be, the Jason mask doubly underscores the fantastic elements of the threats. Jason is, of course, an iconic fictional character of horror films and the mask projects theatricality; becoming the criminal the speaker claims to be would involve the assumption of yet another dramatic persona and poetic mask.

Similar to Eminem's use of the second person, Catullus' use of the vocative case places the reader in the position of the victim.[16] These threats challenge imagined audiences to distinguish whether these threats represent the voice of the poet himself or that of a fictionalized persona within the poem. Since each poet pairs the rejection of autobiographical authenticity with the sort of threats that drew criticism in the first place, these songs playfully challenge readers to perform the precise discursive activity in which they have allegedly failed: to evaluate and recognize a poetic mask.

Satiric though they both may be, Eminem's threat of rape at the close of "Criminal" recalls Catullus' ever-so-Roman mandate to show masculine dominance through sexual penetration in lines 1 and 14. Catullus claims Aurelius and Furius charge him with unmanliness, since, "writing such soft stuff, Catullus must be soft himself, and sexually effeminate" (Wiseman 123; Parker 53). As Holt Parker observes, Catullus threatens the sexual penetration of his critics and thereby offers "*proof* of his status as a *vir,* a manly man" (55, emphasis as original). Catullus and Eminem each couple their threats of violence with vituperative slurs aimed at emasculating detractors: Catullus calls Aurelius and Furius *pathicus* and *cinaedus* respectively, while the first full verse of "Criminal" is a homophobic, slander-laden rant, which queers those who would project the offensive content of Eminem's music onto the artist himself:

> My words are like a dagger with a jagged edge

That'll stab you in the head, whether you're a fag or lez

Or a homosex, hermaph or a trans-a-vest

Pants or dress, hate fags? The answer's yes

Homophobic? Nah, you're just heterophobic

These verses are among the more controversial of Eminem's expansive corpus. As offensive as these sexual and gendered slurs are, they nevertheless map neatly onto Catullus' poetic structure, context, and language. Like Catullus' *pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*, Eminem's slurs occur at the outset of the rapper's program to divest the poet's person from that projected in his poetry. And, like Catullus 16, Eminem's transgressive language is immersed in the poetics of manhood.

Despite the myriad differences between our own contemporary constructions of sexual identity and those of Catullus' Rome, we can observe some essential congruence: Catullus' *pathicus* and *cinaedus* are vulgar slurs, used to emasculate by projecting deviant, unmanly sexuality. (We might loosely translate each of these words as "fag," since each obscene term insults a man for sexual preferences and desires deemed aberrant and non-masculine.) After all, reminds Parker, Roman "men attacked their enemies as *cinaedi*," men who desire to be penetrated (62). And if we continue to read Poem 16 as a ring composition, these emasculating insults pair with the poem's penultimate line: *male me marem putatis*? You, *pathicus* Aurelius and *cinaedus* Furius, *you* think *me* unmanly? Eminem's homophobic slurs function similarly to Catullus' in a heteronormative genre in which the construction of masculinity is dominated by an obsessive mandate to project "hardness."[17] As Heidi Lewis points out, the hip hop culture in which Eminem participates has, historically, been dominated by a "heteropatriarchal … sexual politics" in which sex is conceived as a "unilateral transaction during which men receive while women give, as opposed to a multidirectional experience between consenting partners" (291). Eminem's hyper-masculine stance recalls Catullus' defense against the charge of *mollitia* (softness) and, ultimately, Eminem's invective poetics remain similarly gendered to those of Catullus.

Thus, we see two poems, separated by a vast temporal, cultural, and generic space, which bring similar transgressive literary strategies to bear on similar contexts. "Criminal" exhibits the same two features which Amy Richlin argues are "common in [Catullus'] Priapic poetry: it threatens a man characterized as effeminate … and it identifies the threatened punishment with the poem itself" (156). Catullus and Eminem each step outside their poetic postures of authenticity to demand that the poet and poetic persona not be conflated, and that, if their poetry is sometimes lewd, lascivious, vulgar, and/or violent, these highly stylized poems should not be read to reflect the unadulterated personal views or lifestyles of the author. Each poet does this in verses set within ring compositions of shocking sexually violent threats and emasculating, queering slurs targeting alleged critics. This suggests that the poetics of vituperation have not changed so much in the past two millennia.

IV. *CARMEN AS ERROR*?

But what of audiences and our discursive strategies? If two poets undermine the stances of authenticity upon which their work depends, we ought to ask how and why these poets write similar program poems, imagining similar readers. According to Clay, "it is obvious … that most ancient readers regarded poetry as autobiographical … and confessional," and the advent of the theory of the literary persona around the early twentieth century "seems to have dawned as a new day in modern critical discourse" (10, 17).[18] In Clay's reading, "Furius and Aurelius have committed the same grievous fault that almost all readers of poetry committed throughout antiquity," and the radical distinction made by Catullus is a "distinction that was

unavailable" to Roman readers (33). Significantly, this Roman inability to recognize fictive personae in first-person confessional and/or transgressive poetry is generically specific since, as W. Martin Bloomer shows, the presentation of fictive personae (*fictio personae*) played a crucial role in Roman rhetorical education.[19] Mayer therefore draws a contrast between ancient and contemporary readers, asserting that "few if any Greek and Roman readers were capable of conceiving of the persona in the terms now common to modern critics" (55). But if so much has changed in our abilities to read rhetorical personae, what do we make of Eminem's 21st century revival of seemingly archaic *readerly* personae?

To this end, I return to my pedagogical anecdote to offer a few thoughts on what the pairing of Catullus with Eminem might have to say about audiences. My particular students, who struggled so much to step outside of biographical interpretations of hip hop were not an anomaly, as numerous analyses of hip hop audiences show. Over the course of our discussions, two problematic reading strategies became apparent in the approach my students brought to hip hop and the poetic persona with near unanimity. I propose that perhaps there is more continuity between ancient and modern reading strategies than we might like to admit. I therefore suggest two interrelated trends in the discursive strategies contemporary audiences bring to bear on hip hop.

The first is epistemological. There is a widely held view that rap artists who are perceived to write and sing about their own lived experiences have more *gravitas* than those who do not. Applied to the pervasive themes and subject matter of much mainstream hip hop, this means that artists who come from and participate in the communities and lifestyles they sing about are perceived to be both more authentic and qualitatively better than their counterparts who do not, irrespective of talent or message. Bakari Kitwana puts it succinctly: "A … hip-hop truth is that artists rap about what they know, generally their own life experiences—the more true to life, the better in the eyes of fans" (154). This valuing of authenticity is present in other art forms and genres but perhaps not with the same intensity as hip hop. Focusing on poverty as a prerequisite for credibility, Keller suggests that the degree to which hip hop demands authenticity from its artists is a defining feature of the genre's discursive culture ("Shady Agonistes" 15):

> Perhaps more than any other segment of the popular music industry, the artist needs authenticity; there must be a connection between the rapper's personal background and the social complaint that constitutes his/her lyrics.

The resolute credence that the poet and poetic persona are one (or at least should be) is essential to how many hip hop fans, including my students, understand the genre. Rachel E. Sullivan, for instance, suggests that while hip hop fans differ along racial lines as to how they understand themselves relating to the genre, there is broad consensus among fans that hip hop does represent reality.[20] Greg Dimitriadis understands hip hop as a means through which "young people perform their own realities" (13). Hip hop artists thus affect a sort of theatrical realism. As Clarence Lusane argues, "to their legions of fans, the legitimacy of gangsta rappers is conditioned on the real troubles that they find themselves in" (86).[21] Indeed, Michael Eric Dyson insists (158):

> The genius of hip-hop is that its adherents convince each other–and judging by the attacks it receives, those outside its ranks–that its devices are meant immediately to disclose the truth of life through reportage. In truth, hip-hoppers construct narrative conventions and develop artistic norms through repeated practice and citation.

In short, the generic norms of hip hop seem to require a stance of autobiographical authenticity and this demand to represent reality is made, at least in part, by the audience.

The second connected trend is that popular audiences remain limited in their capacity to distinguish between the poet and the poetic persona unless the persona is too manifestly and outrageously fictional to be ignored. Unless the rapper performs under an alter ego whose character is publicly understood to be fictitious

(Rick Ross was my students' favorite example; in ancient poetry, Ovid's adoption of mythological female personae in his *Heroides* provides an analogue), my students struggled to accept the plain existence of poetic personae. This is despite the obvious fact that most rappers, including Eminem, perform under pseudonyms, and it runs counter to Rosen and Marks' analysis of literary form in hip hop (898):

> Gangsta rappers so routinely call attention to their participation in a tradition, through formal devices, poetic tropes, and the construction of elaborate relationships with rival or antecedent poets, that there can be no question about their desire to confound their alleged autobiographical pretenses and to play to a sophisticated audience that understands the dynamics of poetic fictionality.

Sophisticated audiences *do* struggle to understand the dynamics of poetic fictionality. The pretense of the transgressive poetic "I" continues to disguise the markers of poetic discourse and to confound autobiographical reality with poetic fiction. Just as ancient Roman audiences struggled to recognize poetic masks in poetry despite rhetorical training in *fictio personae*, contemporary audiences well-acquainted with poetic personae often struggle to apply this training to the hip hop genre. Thus, if Eminem and other rappers produce songs filled with misogynistic violent fantasies, yet also release tracks calling for the increased respect of women, my students were predisposed to interpret this contrast not as the presentation of different poetic personae and voices, but instead biographically, as if each of these polarities represented the artist's own deeply personal and ever-evolving perspectives on gender. Clay's evaluation that "the ancient critics of 'Classical' poetry must now seem almost Romantic in their assumption that a poet can be read by his, or more rarely her, poetry" (9) might just as well describe my students as "readers" of hip hop.

As Dawkins observes, "Eminem's discourse and personae do not paint a picture of Marshall Mathers. Rather, they paint a picture of who Marshall Mathers wants his audience to believe and buy into who he is" (474). However, this narratological stance of authenticity remains both powerful and convincing to popular audiences. In the classroom this presents pedagogical challenges; in the courtroom this presents dangerous sociological concerns, since there is a disconcerting and growing trend of using rap lyrics as legal evidence to prosecute actual crimes. Commenting on Department of Justice training documents that call for prosecutors to use rap lyrics "to exploit the defendant's true personality," Andrea Dennis observes (1-2):

> The prosecutor may cast defendant-authored music lyrics as an autobiographical depiction of actual events, hence permitting the lyrics to be treated as inculpatory statements or a confession. Relatedly, the music lyrics may be offered as evidence of the defendant's intent, knowledge, motive, or identity respecting the crime charged.

In practice, rap lyrics admitted as confessional evidence have contributed to numerous convictions, lengthy jail sentences, and at least one death sentence (Kubrin and Nielson; Hirsch).

Perhaps because of the genre's transgressive content, its stances of authenticity and immediacy, and, as Dennis suggests, because of its relative newness as an art form, hip hop audiences often fail to apply the discursive strategies they bring to bear on other literary forms.[22] Dennis remarks (20):

> Similar to other art forms, rap lyrics have their own artistic or poetic conventions. The use of these conventions is commonly understood in more traditional arts such as fiction writing and poetry. Their utility is not, however, as well understood in the context of rap music lyrics.

Against this contextual backdrop, Eminem's protest that "every time I write a rhyme / these people think it's a crime" acquires new poignancy and conjures an Ovidian present in which the boundary between *carmen et error* ("a poem and a mistake," Ov., *Tristia* 2.207) threatens to evaporate. Collectively, adoring fans and

vitriolic opponents of hip hop alike become cast as modern Furii and Aurelii, failing to perform our roles as readers with appropriate nuance. Like ancient readers, popular audiences still struggle to separate poet from poetry, at least when it comes to hip hop. Perhaps Catullus 16 has something resonant and relevant to say not only to students of classics but also to contemporary discursive communities, especially those who would use song lyrics as confessional evidence to prosecute a crime.

"Criminal" is now nearly twenty years old, and words like "fag" are, hopefully, well on their way to becoming as obsolete and antiquated as Catullus' *cinaedus*. However, the poetics of aggressive masculinity and, more importantly, difficulties among readers in identifying poetic masks remain current in our contemporary present. In the final analysis, Catullus and Eminem express similar frustrations and imagine their audiences as struggling to separate art from artist. These confluences point towards a common poetics, as well as the possibility of shared interpretive limitations for both ancient and modern audiences.

NOTES

1. Rosen and Baines 127. As Rosen and Marks have acknowledged, hip hop has often been denied "serious investigation of its poetic provenance" because "the transgressive and counter hegemonic stance of gangsta rap has become so threatening" and because "its origins as a complex poetic form with deep roots in a variety of literary and ritual traditions have, for the most part, been neglected or obscured" (897). As Roland Mayer notes, Juvenal has himself experienced periods of debased reception, in which he was maligned as a mere rhetorician, not a poet. More recent exploration of classical filiations in hip hop include Banks; Padilla Peralta. The bibliography on popular literature and modernism's "Great Divide" between "high" and "low" culture is massive. See Greenberg; Adorno; Huyssen; Scholes.
2. "Criminal"'s album, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, won a 2001 Grammy Award for Best Rap Album and, to date, has sold over 11,000,000 copies in the United States and more than 32,000,000 copies worldwide.
3. In reading aspects of Catullus' *oeuvre* as satiric, I follow also Neudling 186n13; Rankin 121. Amy Richlin relates Poem 16 to the satiric dialogue (147). Rosen and Baines note Catullus' iambi as precursors to Juvenal's satire (113). James Keller suggests that with *The Marshall Mathers LP*, "Eminem evolved into a lovable villain whose clownish violence cannot be taken seriously, but whose social commentary occasionally strikes a direct hit at the heart of the American establishment, his satire holding a particular appeal for adolescents" ("God Sent Me," paragraph 8).
4. As Keller notes ("Shady Agonistes" 22), drawing upon Kristeva (10-12), Eminem oscillates between adopting postures that attack and demonize others and postures which position himself (or at least his alter ego) as abject.
5. Rosen and Baines 114-15. Rosen and Baines note that Eminem claims that he is "constitutionally predisposed to engage in satire," but also, inconsistently, implies "that he requires *external* stimulation to turn him into the most successful satirist possible."
6. On Slim Shady as trickster, who participates in ancient literary and dramatic traditions, see Keller ("God Sent Me").
7. For the text of Catullus, I use Mynors. All translations are my own.
8. Mayer 76. For an alternate view, see Quinn (*Catullan Revolution* 79): "Catullus' disclaimer, so often quoted in Poem 16 on the difference between poetry and reality refers, probably, to this sort of poetry and not, as it is almost ludicrous to suppose, to the Lesbia poem, Poem 5." Thomson suggests *milia multa basiorum* refers to Poem 48, not 5 and 7 (250).
9. Rosen and Marks 897. On this pretense in Catullus, see also Wray 6.
10. Mayer's analysis of Poem 16 is compelling but ultimately at odds with my reading of the poem, which

follows Clay, Batstone, and Lateiner.

11. Rosen and Baines point towards Eminem's disavowal of his authenticity by acknowledging the profoundly ambiguous refrain of "The Way I Am" (123-25): "'Cause I am whatever you say I am / If I wasn't, then why would you say I am?" These lyrics open themselves to an ironic interpretation: that Eminem is not actually who he says he is, let alone who his audience claims him to be. Nevertheless, Rosen and Baines ultimately insist "on the autobiographical authenticity of the work."
12. On the playfulness of these verses, see Martin 67-80; Lateiner 16-17.
13. As Rosen and Baines note of "The Way I Am," "the fact that Eminem describes his output as 'shit' plays on the trope of satire as substandard and nugatory" (115n20), thereby offering up still another connection with Catullus' charming and polished (1.1-2) yet diminutive *libellus* ("little book," 1.1) of *nugae* ("trifles,"1.4).
14. On *irrumare* as imposed silence, see Stevens 77; Richlin 149.
15. Richlin 145. Keller: "When Eminem … threatens violence in order to humiliate … and ensure … submission he engages in behavior that is symptomatic of what R. W. Connell defines as 'masculine protest'" ("Shady Agonistes," 13). On Catullus and manhood, see also Wray.
16. Richlin 147: "… the reader finds himself in the position of the victim; the reader is simultaneously confronted with the vocative case, which identifies him with the victim …" It is worth noting that in antiquity all reading was spoken out loud, so, even while situated as victims, readers would have simultaneously performed as the aggressive poet, speaking aloud the first person *ego*.
17. On hardness and the construction of masculinity in hip-hop, see Byron Hurt's documentary, *Hip-Hop: Beyond the Beats and Rhymes* (2006). On hardness in Catullus, see especially Manwell.
18. Both Clay and Mayer (56) locate Ezra Pound's *Personae* (1909) as a foundational moment in the modern conception of the poetic persona.
19. On *fictio personae*, see also Quintilian 9.29ff.
20. Sullivan suggests that black audiences tend to identify with this reality as their own, while white audiences approach hip hop more as a voyeuristic glimpse into different and unfamiliar life experiences.
21. Imani Perry argues that "many artists themselves encourage such a stance," though, "like any realist movement in art, hip hop realism is filled with metaphors and metonyms" and other generic conventions (39-40).
22. Despite its relative newness as a genre, hip hop's musical, transgressive, and satiric elements have deep roots in much older African and African American traditions. See, for example, Banks; Sylvan; Dallam 84.

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