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SENES SEVERIORES.
NOTES ON *TOO-STRICT* TRANSLATIONS
OF COMPARATIVES (CATUL. V 2)

ABSTRACT: Pierzak Damian, „*Senes severiores*”. Notes on „*too-strict*” translations of comparatives (Catul. V 2).

The paper includes some examples of the comparative usages within adjectives among Catullus' poems for the introduction. The main assumption is to present a quite new point of view on the rendition of *senes severiores*, an expression mostly translated as “too strict / too stern old men”. The new interpretation is to be connected with Roman magistrates – *censores*. The article shortly examines different backgrounds (language, literature, culture) to prove the possibility, that the poet, saying ‘stern old men’ could have meant something more, than it appears at first sight.

Keywords: Catullus, *censores*, translation, comparative.

It seems necessary to say in the introduction, that the idea of this paper is not to force any new and certain interpretation, or to underrate these traditionally accepted, but only to suggest another point of view. The main assumption is an attempt to reach that purpose in small detail through one of the poems dedicated to Lesbia. As it is proposed in the theme above, the chief part will concern the issue of different translations upon the phrase *senes severiores*, which are, so far as we can notice, almost equal. We will display, taking it with a grain of salt, a distinct possibility of understanding these words in background of Catullus' individual style and toward the custom ancient literary sources regarding “old and grave people”.

It should be noted at the outset that there are many comparative usages among Catullus' poems generally, and plenty of them can be just identified as *comparativus absolutus*,¹ though we often treat them this way out of hand. But

¹E. g. 3, 2: *et quantum est hominum venustiorum*; 10, 24: *hic illa, ut decuit cinaediorum*. The discussion over the simple comparative meanings is obviously irrelevant. Nevertheless, despite the comparatives in a while, it is worth to remind ourselves that also superlatives were used by Catullus redundantly, without the gradual meaning, many times (e. g. 4, 14; 36, 6; 78, 1).

sometimes there is a reason to understand such adjectives as caused by the matter of metre and in this case they can be read *in positivi modum: o quantum est hominum beatorum*.² The word *beatorum* alone would mean the same when we read v. 10 together with the latter (*quid me laetius est beatusve?*). “The repetition *beatorum beatus* is cumulative, the first containing the second”, as R. Ellis noticed.³ Other passage is more complicated, or rather ambivalent, and its interpretation depends on one’s consideration: *tollis lintea neglegentiorum*,⁴ because whether we wish to say “you steal from careless” or “too-careless people” does not make any important difference at all. The first part of Poem 33 is interesting with regard to the usage of comparative:

O furum optime balneariorum,
Vibenni pater, et cinaede fili
(nam dextra pater inquinatore,
culo filius est voracior).⁵

Nearly the opposite situation arises here – *modus positivus (balariorum)* sounds like comparative, because of the skilfully set word *balariorum*, but than two comparatives appear: *inquinator*, *voracior*, adjectives having rare occurrence as *comparativi*. Meaning somelike “too filthy”, and “too voracious”, though in that picture of robbery it would be more likely to understand a hand, rather even left one, as thieving more (*voracior*) and a bottom as more dirty in any sort of comparison. Ellis suggests to translate first expression just as “dirty hands”.⁶ Anyway that passus shows at least, in order to the poet’s stylistic proclivities, the casual manipulation of such words.

All the previous examples were delivered to enlighten the vague semantics among many of Catullus’ comparative usages. Secondly, we may inquire, in order to present the possibility of comparative’s special meaning, some example of such expression with lack of gradual reference. Cicero in *pro L. Murena* wrote:

Poena gravior in plebem tua voce efflagitata est: commoti animi tenuiorum: exsilium in nostrum ordinem: concessit senatus postulationi tuae, sed non libenter duriolem fortunae communi condicionem te auctore constituit.⁷

² Catul. 9, 10 Schuster (here and further).

³ R. Ellis, *A Commentary on Catullus*, Oxford 1889, p. 30. His translation: “O, among all men that are happy, what is happier than I”. Problems among metres were already explained enough by O. Skutsch on the examples of Catullus’ imitations of Sappho and Callimachus (cf. O. Skutsch, *Metrical Variations and Some Textual Problems in Catullus* (1969), [in:] J.H. Gaisser (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies “Catullus”*, Oxford 2007, pp. 45 – 56).

⁴ Catul. 12, 3.

⁵ Idem 33, 1 sqq.

⁶ See: R. Ellis, op. cit., ad loc.

⁷ Cic. *Mur.* 23 (47) Klotz. Cf. further: 35 (73): „Omnia haec sunt officia necessariorum, comoda tenuiorum, munia candidatorum”.

Arpinate speaks of Servius Sulpicius' accusation of Lucius Murena, which, in his point of view, lowered his chances in the competition for consulate. Trial during the contest displeases simple people of course, because one of the candidates is engaged in different purposes. What is significant here, that Cicero did not mean "weaker/ too-delicate people" for *tenuiores*, but exactly "those of lower status/ without the statesmanship".

Similar device, as we will try to deduce, is to be detected in Catul. 5, 1–3, which has not been given, in our opinion, the attention it deserves. Here is the full quotation of a well-known passus:⁸

Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus
Rumoresque senum severiorum
Omnes unius aestimemus assis!⁹

Let's see only some of its translations. By J.H. Gaisser:

Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love,
and value at one penny all the gossip of strict old men!¹⁰

Another by J. Lambert:

Let's live and love, my Lesbia,
and value all the chatterings
of too-stern old men at one copper!¹¹

Given the brief sketch of Catullus' vernacular usage of comparative, we observe that the 1st example avoids any kind of comparison, and in the 2nd case the interpreter suggests the absolute meaning, which tempts us to ask a conspicuous question "why were they too-stern?". Only because it is common with old people?¹², or maybe the poet had some intention or reason to offend any particular

⁸The whole idea was inspired by a few words in the monography on Cicero of polish classical scholar K. Morawski. He uses phrase *senes severiores* according to speech *pro M. Caelio*, where they were ment to be bewildered by young aristocrat's behaviour. Other matter, that seems important, is the participation of Clodia in both cases, cf. K. Morawski, *M. Tullius Cicero. Życie i dzieła*, Kraków 1911, 72. See also below for further issues.

⁹Catul. 5, 1 – 3. In fact editor himself counts this place as an example of *comparativus a vi positivi nihil differt, sed ad versus vel pangendos vel concludendos invenitur aptissimus* (cf. *INDEX VERBORUM ET LOCUTIONUM*, s.v. *comparativus* [in:] *Catulli Veronensis liber*, ed. M. Schuster, Lipsiae 1949, p. 120). We will try to disapprove this opinion, but only in way that *severiores* means more than just "strict" (= *severi*). Most of interpreters also accept *vis comparativi* here, as we will notice.

¹⁰J. H. Gaisser, *Blackwell Introductions to the Classical World „Catullus”*, Chichester 2009, p. 113.

¹¹*The Poems of Catullus*, trans. by J. Lambert, Chichester 2007, p. 13.

¹²Cf. also C. J. Fordyce, *A Commentary on Catullus*, Oxford 1961, ad loc.: "the gossip of puritan grey-beards". In fact, the characteristic of the elders created by Cicero in *Cato maior de*

group? There is no way of knowing of course, we can not imagine what the author had in mind without any doubts.¹³

At least we can have an interest in attempting to figure out another possibility, making examination within the scope of the socio-political background. The key word for the task is *censores*, the group of noble men respected by the whole society in Ancient Rome during the time of the Republic. We are sure of at least one phrase used for exchange to name them, or even used more frequently: *virī consulares*.¹⁴ H. P. Syndikus, although he uses the words “grämlichen Sittenwächter” according to the poem we speak of, he later describes them only as strict Elders.¹⁵ He claims that old people were normally respected in Rome, which is to be proved by few quotes of *ab urbe condita*:

Sed curae fuit consulibus et senioribus patrum, ut imperium suo vehemens, mansuetio permitteretur ingenio¹⁶ ; consulares quoque ac seniores ab residuo tribuniciae potestatis odio, cuius desiderium plebi multo acrius quam consularis imperii rebantur esse, prope malebant postmodo ipsos decemviros voluntate abire magistratu quam invidia eorum exsurgere rursus plebem.¹⁷

Both sentences are associated with the Early Republic of course, but it does matter what kind of words Livy used to describe the high nobility – *consules et seniores patrum* (*conscriptorum* comes in mind); *consulares quoque ac seniores*.

senectute (Cic. *Sen.* 65: *At sunt morosi et anxii et iracundi et difficiles senes. Si quaerimus, etiam avari; sed haec morum vitia sunt, non senectutis.[...] Severitatem in senectute probo, sed eam, sicut alia, modicam, acerbiter nullo modo.*) seems to fit with “too-stern” as the translation of *senes severiores*. But what we attempt to achieve is understanding this expression as connected with a particular group of elders, not with each and every one of them. I owe this reference to Cicero’s dialogue to prof. Agnieszka Dziuba.

¹³Other similar translations: “and let us count the gossip of over-strict old men as all worth one penny” (Godwin); “and value at one penny all the talk of stern old men” (Goold); “and value all the talk of stricter old men at one penny” (Lee) quoted by Helen Scott (cf. H. Scott, *Omnes unius aestimemus assis: A Note on Liability for Defamation in Catullus V*, “Roman Legal Tradition” 3, 2006, pp. 95 – 110.). Cf. also polish translations: “Żyjmy, miłujmy Lesbjo, me kochanie! Jako zły szeląg ceśmy mową srogą starców surowych, ich wieczne gderanie...” (by Z. Reis [in:] *Katullus, Poezje*, intr. S. Witkowski, trans. Z. Reis, Lwów 1927, p. 4); “Żyjmy więc, moja Lesbjo, i kochajmy, ceniąc starców surowych każde słowo jak należy – na jeden grosz, nie więcej.” (by J. Wójcicki [in:] *Gajusz Waleriusz Katullus, Poezje*, trans. J. Wójcicki, Warszawa 1990, p. 15); “Żyjmy, ma Lesbjo, i kochajmy, młodzi! A o gadanie starych zrzędu uparte nie dbajmy! Nawet i grosza niewarte” (by A. Świderkówna [in:] *Katullus, Poezje*, trans. A. Świderkówna, Wrocław 2005, p. 8.).

¹⁴Because the only persons who were allowed to become censor were ex-consuls, and as we know – *consules* had more power (*imperium, imperium maius*), so *vir consularis* sounds more respectable. Similar situation with *patres conscripti* instead of *senatores*.

¹⁵H. P. Syndikus, *Catull. Eine Interpretation; Vol. I, Einleitung. Die kleinen Gedichte (1–60)*, Darmstadt 1984, 92 sq.

¹⁶Liv. 2, 30, 4 Weissenborn (here and below).

¹⁷Idem 3, 41, 5.

Especially the 2nd expression seems to be a good match with our idea. Even if we do not treat it as *hendiadys*, still, it can not simply concern ordinary old men.¹⁸

Horace uses the word *ensor* describing people who are too old to create anything because of their laziness and nostalgic behaviour. The only thing they can do is criticize those who are younger (*castigator censorque minorum*¹⁹). The same meaning occurs also at other authors' works, according to OLD.²⁰ On the other hand, among the quotations of *ensor* – the magistrate in Rome, we find some interesting piece, more valuable, since written in the Late Republic, in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*:

Sin nihil eorum fieri potest, utatur extrema defensione: dicat non se de moribus eius apud censores, sed de criminibus adversariorum apud iudices dicere.²¹

An advice for the defender at court. *Patronus* should sketch out the character of the accused, and in the difficult case, first and foremost, he has to describe his disadvantages, these without any association with the case itself, of course.²² If the strategy fails, he should make them remember that it is not for *ensores* to judge, but for *iudices*. The matter of justice is one thing, the behaviour another. That reference picks up the theme of the critics, whose habit of moral assessment had been conspicuously depicted. An important parallel, which states that *ensores* as public teachers are no worth of penny, was found in Seneca's letters by Fordyce.²³ Ellis suggests "ensorious" in *the commentary on Catullus for severiorum*, but, unfortunately, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, it does not give the solution.²⁴

¹⁸Even if *ensores* as magistrates in particular were "invented" later (cf. Liv. 4, 8, 7), there are reasons to believe that words like *seniores patrum* meant rather more than "elders" in the simple meaning. Moreover, Catullus could have intended to invoke the obsolete words in order to allude to the old-fashioned manners of the group, which he objected to. "If archaic literary diction represents one end of the stylistic spectrum, at the other end is «vulgar» idiom, meaning vernacular language associated with common people in the eyes of status elites." See: G. A. Sheets, *Elements of style in Catullus*, [in:] *A Companion to Catullus*, ed. M. B. Skinner, Blackwell Publishing 2007, p. 194 sq.

¹⁹*Ars* 174.

²⁰Sen. *Dial.* 5, 36, 2; 7, 20, 5; Tac. *Ann.* 3, 34; Ov. *Pont.* 4, 12, 25, and more – cf. OLD, s.v. *Censor*, 2a – b. Of all these, mostly useful for us are Ovid's words: *Saepe ego correxi sub te censore libellos*, since sented to *ensor* as the literary work assessor. And, what is for sure – he is closer to Catullus himself being an author of elegies, and writing after not so many years from the fall of the Republic.

²¹*Rhet. Her.* 2, 5.

²²This was the common procedure used by ancient speakers in trials. The author of *Rhetorica ad Herennium* places only few possibilities of defense, if the argument with "pure life" does not work: *Defensor primum demonstrabit vitam integram, si poterit; id si non poterit, confugiet ad imprudentiam, stultitiam, adulescentiam, vim, persuasionem.*

²³Sen. *Ep.* 123, 2: *istos tristes et superciliosos alienae vitae censores, suae hostes, publicos paedagogos assis ne feceris*, cf. C.J. Fordyce, op. cit., p. 106.

²⁴Cf. OED, s.v. *Censorious* 1, 2: "addicted to censure", "severely critical", "faultfinding", "grave", etc.

The next step would be to search for any further meanings of *senes / severi*. As a combination among poetry we can find *severi senes* in Lucan,²⁵ and Catullus himself uses *severos* for persons to whom *lymphae*, the metonymy of water, should migrate, while he is drinking *merus* of Θυώνη (Semele – Bacchus’ mother).²⁶ Cicero however set a citizen *popularis* whom calls *levis*, against *constantem, severum, gravem*.²⁷ The second portrait thus must describe *optimates*. We can certainly presume that Catullus could not be afraid of chatterings belonging to some non-important old men. The other thing is that none of those guardians of morality could let themselves speak widely about some affairs that happened, which gives us *rumores*. An interesting point of view was presented by Helen Scott, that *aestimare* can be related with the legal terminology – *de iniuriis aestimandis*: if *rumores* would come true, both – the poet and his lover, who is unequal in societal status, are in danger of defamation.²⁸ Another possibility is to understand *senes* as a rendition from Greek into Latin,²⁹ which gives especially γέροντες, however there is no reason to rule out πρέσβεις, and both of these words can have marks of political sense (“the elders”, “council”, etc.). And since we know of Catullus’ many imitations of Greek lyrics, it would be unlike to exclude that the poet’s intention was to express one of the meanings above. Looked at in this way, the whole passage including counting the kisses, after a warning was sent to the critics, could just be to divert attention from reproaching the noble men. We can provide their nobility if we notice that two lines possibly connected with law are not what we expect from *poeta Veronensis* as invective. Moreover, if we consider Poem 16 and its audience for purpose of offending less influential literary critics.³⁰ Drawn a distinction between *censores* the assessors of morality, and *censores* the assessors of literary works, we can match the formers with Poem 5, and the latters with Poem 16. Catullus even mentioned that men has to be pure, though it is not necessary for poetry.³¹ It is certain too, that through Poem 76 he is attempting to recover his *pietas* and to describe himself as a good citizen with all the statesmanships (*bonus vir Romanus*). An excuse for the guardians of morality in words such as “it aint easy to abandon love that

²⁵ 6, 453 sq.

²⁶ 27, 6 sq.

²⁷ *Amic.* 95.

²⁸ See: H. Scott, op. cit., pp. 98–100.

²⁹ Cf. OLD, s. v. *Senex* 1d.

³⁰ H.P. Syndikus (op. cit., p. 93) finds too another place, where Catullus expresses his emotions with more slander either according to the kind of a ‘bad critic’ and with the value of As:

“Non assis facis? O lutum, lupanar,
aut si perditius potest quid esse!

sed non est tamen hoc satis putandum” (Catul. 42, 13 sqq). It is worth to observe that the comparative usage of *perditius* stands for ἄπαιξ λεγόμενον.

³¹ 16, 5 sq: *nam castum esse decet pium poetam
ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est;*

last so long” can be found.³² And if we say that literary aesthetics of neoterics included individuality and giving up the idea of State³³ – thus the chances of our interpretation are increased. And it is worth a brief notice, that according to the matter of neoteric stylistics and their “other voice” in order to the elevated poetry that Ennius wrote, we may presume that Cicero himself could have been amount of those, against whom Catullus lashed out. First trace leads us to the Arpinate’s view over the new style peculiar to *poetae novi*, which is, so to say, his own expression. Secondly, we can imagine that Poem 49, with its ironic tone, was intended to take a contrary stand in this contest.³⁴

According to *pro M. Caelio*, the speech delivered by Cicero in 56 BC, Clodia, while in this paper we agree that Lesbia and Clodia Metelli are the same person,³⁵ was a female well-known for her social disorders and suspicious relationships. All such features were causing trouble and gossip. And although any reliable answer to the question, why Cicero defended Caelius, is beyond our grasp, one of the reasons might have been the conflict with Clodius and his sister. After for the first time he admitted that the real trial is with Caelius’ alleged ex-lover, his words are as follows:

Sic enim, iudices, reperietis, quod, cum ad id loci venero, ostendam, hanc Palatinam Medeam migrationemque huic adulescenti causam sive malorum omnium sive potius sermonum fuisse.³⁶

She mostly was the reason for talking and after that for any other misfortunes. Then the speaker brings out her ancestor (Appius Claudius Caecus) to make him speak in the name of the house and the family. That figure seems to appear here essentially as a symbol of criticism, and, what is an important clue – he represents too *censores* – and in the eyes of Cicero he matches the definition of an ideal magistrate. When his (sc. Appius’) words are done, Cicero removes him “being afraid” that he would even start to accuse Caelius himself with his censorious severity:

Sed quid ego, iudices, ita gravem personam induxi, ut [et] verear, ne se idem Appius repente convertat et Caelium incipiat accusare illa sua gravitate censoria?³⁷

³² 76, 13: *difficile est longum subito deponere amorem*;

³³ See: J. Styka, *Studia nad literaturą rzymską epoki republikańskiej. Estetyka satyry republikańskiej. Estetyka neoteryków*, Kraków 1994, pp. 95, 103.

³⁴ Cf. W. R. Johnson, *Neoteric Poetics* [in:] *A Companion to Catullus...*, p. 175 sqq. For the different interpretation, see: S. C. Stroup, *Catullus, Cicero, and the Society of Patrons. The Generation of the Text*, Cambridge University Press 2010, p. 226 sq.

³⁵ For the other view on Lesbia’s identity, see e.g. T. P. Wiseman, *Catullus and his World / A Reappraisal*, Cambridge 1985 (repr. 2002), p. 2.

³⁶ Cic. *Cael.* 8 (18) Mueller.

³⁷ *Ibidem* 15 (35).

Moreover, Cicero later wrote, that “there is no need for the State to keep special prefects for women, as it is in Greece, but there should be a censor, who would teach men, how to keep a tight rein on their wives”,³⁸ which in some extent may prove his statement on *censor* as a proper assessor of women’s morality, especially of these *Palatinae Medeae*.

There is one more subject left to discuss. Seeking the meaning we may try to involve some rhetorical procedures. In this particular case we should certainly look after some kind of periphrase (gr. ἀντωνομασία) rather than sort of *abstractum pro concreto*.³⁹ So called *pronominatio* was using epithets to substitute names, objects or phrases. Although that figure of speech is more common with *carmina docta*, we can display at least one example among those regarding Lesbia, while it would be rather euphemistic to call it “a poem dedicated to Lesbia”:

Caeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa,
Illa Lesbia, quam Catullus unam
Plus quam se atque suos amavit omnes:
Nunc in quadriuiis et angiportis
Glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes.⁴⁰

Magnanimi Remi nepotes obviously means *cives Romani*.⁴¹ Even *quadriuiis et angiportis* sounds like “in highly suspicious places”. The meaning of “the descendants of mighty Remus” appears sufficiently clear, still it proves that it was not unlike for Catullus to express himself that way in such poetic circumstances.⁴²

Therefore our suggestion is to consider at least *censores* for *senes severiores*, and more specifically, those assessors of morality, high nobility in the Republic. Of course it is hardly possible to prove, that there was any official attack of censors as magistrates against the poet or Lesbia. As it had been said above, we presume that word *rumores* denies such matter. It is more reasonable to expect that the assessment was indirect. Keeping this in mind, we could suggest reading that passage as follows: “Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love, and value at one penny all the gossip of censorious noble men”. Such translation does not tempt us to omit completely the meaning of the Roman magistrate, while on the other hand lets us describe them just as elders accustomed to moral censure.

³⁸ Idem, *Rep.* 4, 6 (fr. 3): “Nec vero mulieribus praefectus praeponatur, qui apud Graecos creati solet, sed sit censor, qui viros doceat moderari uxoribus”.

³⁹ Like *desiderio meo* (i. e. Lesbiae), see: *Catul.* 2, 5.

⁴⁰ Idem, 58.

⁴¹ Cf. 49, 1: *Dissertissime Romuli nepotum*. And also: 34, 22 sqq.

⁴² Especially as that part of the poem (before counting the kisses) is plenty of rhetorical figures. E. g. antithesis: *omnes – unius, brevis lux – nox perpetua*; metaphore (v. 4 sq); also εὐφημισμός: *nox...dormienda; ὑπερβατόν: unius...assis*.

SENES SEVERIORES. NOTAE DE COMPARATIVIS ACERBIUS CONVERTENDIS
(CATUL. V 2)

S u m m a r i u m

Quaestiones huius operae in unius dicti (i. e. 'senum severiorum') nova interpretatione offerenda nituntur. Primum varii comparativi in Catulli carminibus usus expositi sunt. Deinde paucae interpretationes horum verborum nostra aetate propositae ostenduntur. Tertio gradu obiectum est, ut pro senibus severioribus 'censores' intellegere possemus. Dein coniectura ea aptioribus exemplis eorum subiectivorum ('senes', 'censores') apud priscos scriptores inveniendis probatur. Duae facies censoris – castigatoris morum litterarumque conferuntur, et illam primam nostris studiis hoc loco (Catul. V 2) proponimus. Pauca etiam de Clodia ista et de aliis poetae Veronensis carminibus, quibus acerbiores contumelias effudit, dicta sunt.