

ESSAY P. 111

Wit characterizes Catullus 13. Discuss several humorous elements in the poem.

Support your assertions with references drawn from the poem. All Latin words must be copied or their line numbers provided, AND they must be translated or paraphrased closely enough so that it is clear you understand the Latin. Direct your answer to the question; do not merely summarize the passage. Please write your essay on a separate piece of paper.



TEACHER BY THE WAY

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Students may wish to begin their discussion by pointing out that the humor or wit in this poem is “easy” or “gentle,” the sort characteristic of good friends. Catullus appears to be teasing Fabullus. The many humorous elements in this poem will enable students to structure their essays in a variety of ways. They might organize their essay by pointing out humorous elements line-by-line, or by discussing a particular strategy for evoking humor—for example, how the humor often is based on the unexpected.

The humor in this poem is lighthearted, the sort characteristic of good friends. Much of the wit of Poem 13 is based on the element of surprise. For example, the date of the dinner party is not set, but is indefinite, “within a few days” (*paucis . . . diēbus*, line 2). Catullus requests that Fabullus cater the dinner-party himself, if he expects to dine well (lines 3–5), and that he supply the intangibles of wit (*sāl* on a metaphorical level) and of loud laughter (*cachinnis*), in addition to good food, and lots of it, and a gorgeous girl. Catullus surprises us with the oxymoron that his purse is full of spider webs (lines 7–8) and with the divine pedigree of the *unguentum* (*quod . . . / dōnārunt Venerēs Cupīdinēsq̄ue*, lines 11–12) that he will supply for the dinner party. Most surprising of all is the climactic assertion that the (heavenly) scent of the *unguentum* will result in Fabullus’s praying to the gods to be metamorphosed into a gigantic nose (line 14).

Other humorous elements include the hyperbaton in line 14 *tōtum . . . nāsum*, which visually consumes Fabullus by enclosing him and his name: *TŌTUM ut tē faciant, Fabulle, NĀSUM*; the hyperbaton of *paucis . . . diēbus*, in line 2 which postpones the noun “days”; the unexpected use of the adjective *merus*, to modify the word “love” instead of “wine” in line 9; and the amusing expression “if Fabullus is lucky” (*sī tibi dī favent*, line 2), which enhances the indefinite date of the invitation.

The humorous elements contribute to the creation of a very witty poem.