

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# The Lesbia Poems

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To entitle a chapter “The Lesbia Poems” implies that Catullus’ work includes a number of poems about Lesbia, which is true; that these poems form a cycle with a sort of plot or narrative structure, which is partially true; and that this cycle is detachable from the rest of Catullus’ oeuvre, which is not true, despite the common practice of excerpting the Lesbia poems in anthologies. Much of the richness and strangeness of Catullus lies in his unsettling, brilliant decision to tell the “story” of his relationship with Lesbia all jumbled up, with poems about falling in love long after poems about breaking up, and poems on a variety of other topics interspersed. Whereas Propertius begins his collection with a resounding declaration of its dominant topic – “Cynthia first with those eyes of hers captured me in my misery” (Prop. 1.1.1) – Catullus neither begins nor ends his collection with Lesbia. Nevertheless, it is the poet’s passionate affair with this woman that forms the book’s dramatic core, giving meaning and coherence to the whole.

Before tackling the poems themselves, I should say a few words about who Lesbia was, a problem that has occupied scholars for many decades. It is nearly certain that Lesbia is a poetic pseudonym for Clodia, an aristocratic *femme fatale* of the late Roman Republic who was the sister of Cicero’s arch-enemy, the demagogue P. Clodius Pulcher. Catullus encourages us to lift the flimsy veil of pseudonymity when he starts a poem with an unmistakable allusion, “Lesbius is beautiful (*pulcher*)” (79.1): Lesbia/Lesbius mirrors Clodia/Clodius, and *pulcher*, “beautiful,” was Clodius’ cognomen and nickname (Cicero’s letters often refer to him as “Little Beauty”). The waters become murkier when we attempt to determine which of Clodius’ three sisters Lesbia was, however, because all sisters in a noble family had the same name (the feminine form of the family name). As I have argued elsewhere (Dyson forthcoming), it is most probable that the commonly accepted equation of Lesbia with Clodia Metelli (= “wife of Metellus”) is correct. The strongest evidence for this equation comes, again, from clues Catullus plants in the poems themselves: around the time Catullus was writing (56 BC), Clodia Metelli was attacked by Cicero





And yet we have, along with the poems themselves, enough of their cultural and literary context to caution us against taking them at face value. The interpretive dilemma is this: is this sparrow only a sparrow, or is it also a double-entendre for the poet's penis? Some of the scholars included in the present volume would call the obscene interpretation "implausible," while others would call it "certain." Some arguments against the obscene reading: (1) the image of the sparrow twittering and jumping around hither and thither "brings us to the world of Benny Hill's Ernie the milkman rather than the urbanity of the neoterics" (Pomeroy 2003: 50); (2) the witty, mischievous Ovid, in his poem (*Am.* 2.6) about the death of his mistress's parrot, an obvious imitation of Catullus' sparrow-death poem, does not appear to have imitated the obscene aspect (though perhaps later readers will find that he has . . .); (3) why would Catullus wish to play with himself (how else can we interpret 2.9–10?) rather than reap the benefit of his girl's "burning heat"? Some arguments for the obscene reading (see R. F. Thomas 1993): (1) Martial, a first-century AD imitator of Catullus, embraced the obscenity (Martial's "sparrow" poems are collected in Dyson forthcoming; for discussion, see Lorenz, this volume, pp. 425–6); (2) Greek epigrams – which Catullus knew well – provide several examples of impotence as the "death" of the phallus and the death of pets as a code for this phenomenon; (3) the exaggerated phallus of Roman mime was called a *strutheum*, from Greek *strouthos*, "sparrow" (Fest. 410 Lindsay *DVS*; quoted below in Gaisser, p. 447), and Roman comedy would appear to exploit the double-entendre potential of this proverbially salacious bird. In any case, it is appropriate that the introductory pair of love poems should leave us with an enormous question, an ambiguity of tone that characterizes, in fact, most of Roman erotic poetry: is the *puella* weeping tears of tender grief over her pet's death or tears of sexual frustration over her lover's impotence?

After a dedicatory epigram for the ship that carried Catullus home from Asia (poem 4), the sparrow and its attendant interpretive conundra are swept away by the first poem to tell us the *puella*'s name. One of Catullus' most loved and most imitated poems, it gives a snapshot of exuberant passion:

Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love,  
 and let us calculate all the mutterings of  
 curmudgeonly old coots to be worth one cent.  
 Suns have the power to set and rise again;  
 our brief light, when once it has set, leaves only                   5  
 one night we must sleep for all eternity.  
 Give me kisses, a thousand, then a hundred;  
 then another thousand, then a second hundred;  
 then still another thousand, then a hundred.  
 Then, when we will have made so many thousands,               10  
 we'll garble them up, so that we may not know,  
 nor any wicked man have power to give us  
 the evil eye, knowing the quantity of kisses.

(poem 5)

Death is the shadow that gives poetry its brightness. Lines 5.4–6 are an exquisite expression of this theme – *the* theme of most love poetry, as of life. But amid the

reflections on time and eternity, light and darkness, there is a slightly discordant insistence on what would at first seem an odd counterpoint: money. In addition to the obvious monetary metaphor in “calculating” the coots’ mutterings “to be worth one cent,” the word order in line 7, “Give me kisses, a thousand, then a hundred,” recalls a request for goods at market, naming first the product and then the price (Quinn 1973a: 109). And yet, the juxtaposition of time, money, and love is perhaps not so strange after all. Our inability to stockpile time, its relentless shift from the black to the red despite all our attempts to save it, is one of the persistent frustrations of human existence. Love is caught uncomfortably between the other two: it increases with consumption yet cannot be stored. The avoidance of the “evil eye” from someone who knows the exact “quantity of kisses” alludes to the black-magical principle that possessing some piece of personal information about the victim is necessary to place a curse. But the first purpose clause, “so that *we* may not know,” captures the lovers’ longing to lose themselves in their own infinity, a desire made urgent by the desert of vast eternity lying before them.

In contrast to the joyous abandon of poem 5, so poignant under the threat of eternal darkness, poem 7 attempts to pinpoint precisely *how* infinite the lovers’ embraces will be. It begins with an indirect question, the first we have “heard” from Lesbia herself:

You ask how many of your kissations, Lesbia,  
 would be enough for me and more than enough.  
 How great the quantity of Libyan sands  
 lying upon Cyrene, rich in silphium,  
 between the oracle of steamy Jove 5  
 and the sacred sepulcher of ancient Battus;  
 or how many stars, when night is silent, gaze  
 upon the furtive love affairs of men:  
 for you to kiss so many kisses is  
 enough and more than enough for crazed Catullus – 10  
 too many for snoops to be able to reckon up  
 completely, or an evil tongue to bewitch.

(poem 7)

The conversation is full of playful erudition, a far cry from the girlish image conveyed by *turgiduli ocelli* (“swollen little little eyes”). Again, an ambiguity, this time about Lesbia’s words, complicates interpretation: Did she actually say, “How many of my kissations are enough for you?” Or did the poet translate a simple question – “How many kisses are enough for you?” – into his own pseudo-intellectual jargon? (Teachers leading discussion groups are familiar with this phenomenon. “Aeneas is, like, such a nobody.” “You mean Virgil has made his protagonist an unfilled signifier on whom other characters project their own personalities?”) The reason it matters whether she has actually spoken the word “kissations” is that this neologism is the first indication that Lesbia has (to put it bluntly) anything upstairs. In fact, despite the common perception of Lesbia as an intellectual match for the poet, whose self-professed wit, charm, and polish are the trademarks of the “new poetry” he pioneers, this passage is one of only two in the polymetrics to suggest that wit plays any part in their relationship. (We may again compare Propertius’ Cynthia, who is given long,

colorful, witty speeches in her “own voice.”) If *basiationes* is Lesbia’s own coinage, then she displays her erudition; if it is Catullus’ projection, then her level of intelligence is still an open question.

What poem 7 unquestionably does is mark the affair’s loss of innocence, in a sense, by emphasizing its adulterous nature. Cyrene was the birthplace of Callimachus, the third-century BC Greek poet who was a paragon of the learned allusiveness and polish that characterize Catullus’ “new” style of poetry; Callimachus is referred to as a “son of Battus” (an ancient king of Cyrene), and Catullus’ allusion to Battus here alerts us to his own allusiveness. But the epithet “rich in silphium” signals adultery: silphium was a rare plant used as a highly effective contraceptive, facilitating the sterile promiscuity of the Roman upper classes. The allusion to the chief god’s infamous philandering in “*steamy* Jove,” followed by the stars’ gazing upon the “*furtive* love affairs of men,” leaves no doubt about the relationship’s illicitness.

Whatever misgivings may have been engendered by poem 7 are confirmed by poem 8. Suddenly the playful passion of the first two pairs of Lesbia poems is overturned by the poet’s announcement that the relationship is as dead as the sparrow:

Miserable Catullus, please stop being idiotic  
and recognize that what you see has died is dead.  
Suns blazed for you radiantly once upon a time,  
when you would come and go wherever that girl led,  
loved by me as no other ever will be loved; 5  
at the time when all those fun-and-games were going on  
which you wanted, and the girl was not unwilling,  
suns blazed for you radiantly, without a doubt.  
Now she doesn’t want them: don’t you want them either,  
crazy fool – and don’t chase her as she flees, and live in misery, 10  
but suffer it with obstinate mind, harden your heart.  
Girl, farewell! Now Catullus hardens his heart,  
and he won’t seek you out, or ask you against your will.  
But you’ll be sorry, when you aren’t asked at all.  
Worse luck for you, damned bitch! What life remains for you? 15  
Who will go to you now? To whom will you seem pretty?  
Whom will you love now? Whose will you be said to be?  
Whom will you kiss? Whose little lips will you nibble?  
But you, Catullus, be resolved and harden your heart.  
(poem 8)

Poem 6, a nasty little gem that shines a cynical spotlight on the besotted “idioty” of one Flavius, shows what an obsessive love affair looks like from the outside (see Wray 2001: 159); poem 8 shines a similar light on the “idiotic” Catullus. In contrast to the self-consciously learned, precious allusiveness of the previous poem, the phrasing of poem 8 is deliberately simple, as if Catullus has taken on the persona of a fool – or cast himself in the role of Lesbia’s avian plaything. “You would come and go wherever that girl led” recalls how the sparrow, “frolicking about now hither, now thither, / ever would twitter to his mistress alone” (3.9–10). The poem’s opening word, “miserable” (Latin *miser*), which becomes almost a technical term for love-sickness

in all future Latin erotic poetry, is used first of the “miserable little sparrow” (3.16). The *puella* who “trifles with” (*iocari*, 2.6) her pet is echoed in the “fun-and-games” (*iocosa*) the girl and her lover enjoyed. The puerile whine of “you’ll be sorry, when you aren’t asked at all” contrasts comically with the allusive sophistication of “Cyrene rich in silphium.”

The next Lesbia poem completes the initial “cycle”: sparrow-pair, kiss-pair, renunciation-pair. If as a rule Catullus’ poems are uniform in tone, with shifts *between* poems rather than within a single one, poem 11 breaks that rule not once but twice. The poet takes us first on a dizzying journey to the ends of the known world – a martial, masculine adventure with his “comrades,” a word often used of fellow soldiers:

Furius and Aurelius, Catullus’ comrades,  
 whether he penetrates to deepest India,  
 where on the shore the eastern wave resounding  
 endlessly echoes,  
 or to the Hyrcani, or the soft Arabs, 5  
 or the Sagae, or Parthians skilled in archery,  
 or to where the Nile of seven branches  
 colors the waters,  
 or if he marches across the lofty Alps  
 visiting great Caesar’s monuments, 10  
 the Gallic Rhine, the horrid sea, the Britons  
 furthest of all men,  
 ready to undertake all these together  
 with him, wherever the will of heaven will bear him –

. . . suddenly the key changes, he wrenches us out of the fantastic travelogue and back to the world of the heart:

give a message to my girl, these words 15  
 few and not pretty:  
 Let her live, and fare well, with her perverts,  
 whom she clasps three hundred at a time,  
 loving none truly, but grinding the groins of all of them  
 over and over; 20

It may seem, as some readers have objected, that the first half of the poem is disproportionate or irrelevant to the second. The poetic strategy, however, is the powerful rhetorical device known as a “priamel”: a long list of “foils” is presented in apparent contrast to the subject to be praised (or, as here, blamed), and the reflected light from the foils ultimately illuminates the subject. (For a modern example of the priamel form, compare the Beach Boys song “California Girls.”) So intense is the poet’s love and hate that it encompasses the known world. His malediction, “Let her live, and fare well,” reverses the passionate prayer of poem 5, “Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love,” with ironic bitterness; the gratingly crude phrasing of “grinding the groins,” the absurd exaggeration of “three hundred” lovers, seem almost the stuff of satiric epigram.

Yet Catullus does not leave us there. The final stanza is astonishingly beautiful:

and let her not, as before, look for my love,  
 which through her wrong has fallen like a flower  
 at the meadow's edge, once it is touched by the plow-blade  
 heedlessly passing.

(poem 11)

To appreciate the power of this stanza requires a short digression on Roman sexual mores in the late Republic and, in particular, the pervasive double standard that was taken for granted. Men had little to lose other than their own equanimity: to sleep with slaves, prostitutes, and adolescent males was perfectly acceptable, and even affairs with upper-class women were generally winked at as long as they produced no financial complications or illegitimate children. For a woman (or girl – upper-class females often married in their early teens) to be “deflowered,” on the other hand, was seen as a kind of death, a spoiling beyond repair (see Dyson 1999). Catullus shows the depth of his wound by assuming the role of one who actually has something to lose, a young female virgin. The flower is not deliberately cut or plucked, simply nicked by a plow “heedlessly passing” as it performs an unrelated task. If the Catullus of poem 8 feels the comic pathos of rejection, the Catullus of poem 11 feels the tragic agony of betrayal.

And then, after a poem about some idiot (the third we’ve seen so far) who thinks stealing napkins is clever (poem 12), the Lesbia landscape returns to harmless fun. The “Venuses and Cupids” of the sparrow-dirge are back, providing Catullus’ girl with some very special scent:

You will dine well at my place, my Fabullus,  
 in a few days, if the gods are smiling on you –  
 provided that you bring with you a fine, large  
 dinner, not without a radiant girl  
 and wine and salt and every sort of laughter. 5  
 I say, if you’ll bring these things, my attractive friend,  
 you will dine well; for your own Catullus’  
 wallet is overflowing with spider webs.  
 But you’ll receive in return pure essence of love,  
 and something, if possible, smoother and more refined: 10  
 for I’ll provide a perfume that the Venuses  
 and Cupids have bestowed upon my girl.  
 Once you get a whiff of this, you’ll beg  
 the gods, Fabullus, to make you totally nose.

(poem 13)

Whereas the sparrow poems (2 and 3) ended with “swollen little little eyes,” the kiss-poems (5 and 7) with evil eye and wicked tongue, the renunciation poems (8 and 11) with bitten lips and broken groins, poem 13 concludes with that most primal of sense organs and comic of body parts: the nose. If we were encouraged by the tragic end of poem 11 to take the affair seriously, this return to comedy brings us up short. And that is the last we see of Lesbia for over twenty poems.



The next pair of Lesbia poems is a choice example of Catullus' ability to combine intense emotion, intellectual playfulness, and scatological crudity:

“Annals” of Volusius, sheets of shit,  
be ye a votive offering for my girl.  
For she vowed to holy Venus and to Cupid  
that if I would be reconciled to her  
and cease to hurl my fierce poetic curses, 5  
then she would offer to the gimpy god  
the choicest writings of the worst of poets,  
to be scorched by an unhappy bonfire.  
And the girl saw that she was wittily vowing  
these, the very worst, to the merry gods. 10  
Now, oh goddess born of the blue-black sea,  
you who dwell upon holy Idalium,  
and open Urii, and Ancon, and sandy  
Cnidus, and Amathus, and Golgi, and  
Durrachium, the Inn of the Adriatic, 15  
let this vow be rendered and accepted,  
if it is neither uncharming nor unattractive.  
But you, meanwhile, proceed into the flames,  
ye paragons of boorish fatuosity,  
“Annals” of Volusius, sheets of shit.  
(poem 36)

As in poem 2, the real topic of this hymnic parody is of course Lesbia, whose threat to consign to the flames the “choicest writings of the worst of poets” Catullus willfully misinterprets, comically enlisting her vow in the battle between the slender elegance of his own “new poetry” and the bloated epic grandiloquence represented by Volusius’ “Annals.” Aside from “kissations” in poem 7, this is the only other polymetric passage that gives any echo of Lesbia’s voice – and as in poem 7, the joke may be the poet’s rather than her own. She is at least aware of the “fierce poetic curses” he hurls at her, but despite Catullus’ declaration that her vow is “witty,” the true wit appears to lie in his ability to deflect that vow away from his own verses and onto his poetic competitor’s.

The shift from playful conversation to comic rejection that we saw in poems 7 and 8 is recapitulated in the shift from poem 36 to poem 37:

Smutty tavern, and you all, its comrades-in-arms,  
nine columns down the street from the cap-wearing Brothers,  
you think that you’re the only ones in possession of pricks?  
that you alone are free to fuck whatever girls  
there are, and to think the rest of us are rancid goats? 5  
Or, just because you clods all sit there in a row,  
a hundred or two hundred, you think I wouldn’t dare  
to facefuck all two hundred sitting there at once?  
Well, you’d better think again: for it is my intention  
to scribble you dicks all over the front wall of this inn. 10  
For my girl, who has fled away out of my bosom,  
loved by me as no other ever will be loved,

on whose behalf great battles have been fought by me,  
 has pitched her tent there. All you fine and fortunate fellows  
 love her, and what's more – which is totally unfair – 15  
 all you beggars and buggers skulking around in alleys;  
 you above all, alone of all the long-haired dandies,  
 son of Celtiberia, that rabbit land,  
 Egnatius, whom a dark, shadowy beard makes fine,  
 and teeth shined to a sparkle by Iberian piss.

(poem 37)

Not only does this poem share the relatively rare meter (“limping iambs”) of poem 8, but it contains a nearly direct quotation (8.5 ≈ 37.12). Even more than poem 8, however, poem 37 plays like a scene from a comedy: as I have attempted to convey in my translation (“comrades-in-arms,” “great battles,” “pitched her tent”), Catullus is assuming here the comic role of the *miles gloriosus* or braggart soldier (Wray 2001: 85–6).

The “flight” of Lesbia in poem 37, like all the break-ups so far, turns out to be temporary, for she is back in the poet’s good graces in the next Lesbia poem. If we can divine her personality only through indirect speech, we can divine her appearance only through a sort of indirect description, a catalogue of the defects of a competitor elsewhere identified as “Ameana”:

Greetings, girl of not-the-smallest nose,  
 nor of pretty foot, nor of dark eyes,  
 nor of long fingers, nor of mouth undrooling,  
 nor, in fact, of tongue too elegant,  
 girlfriend of the depleted Formian. 5  
 The province is declaring *you* are pretty?  
 My Lesbia is being compared with *you*?  
 Oh fatuous and witless generation!

(poem 43)

Lesbia, presumably, is everything this woman is not. Once again, aside from the ambiguous “tongue” – whose inclusion in the list of body parts would seem to emphasize its corporeal rather than its linguistic aspect – the focus is entirely on isolated physical characteristics. The “generation” (*saeclum*) of judges is accused of lacking taste and wit, but the minds of Ameana and Lesbia play no explicit role in this beauty contest.

Yet Lesbia is not the only one portrayed in vividly physical terms. Poem 51, which is often considered the fictive “beginning” of the affair, captures the physiological effects of sexual obsession on the poet himself:

He seems to me the equal of a god,  
 he seems – if it is right – to surpass the gods,  
 who sits across from you and sees you and hears you  
 over and over  
 sweetly laughing, which in my misery ravishes 5  
 all my senses: for when I have once laid eyes

upon you, Lesbia, then of the voice in my mouth  
 nothing is left me,  
 but my tongue grows numb, a slender flame  
 oozes down within my limbs, my ears with 10  
 their own sound are ringing, and my eyes are  
 buried in twin night.  
 Leisure, Catullus, is troubling to you;  
 leisure gets you too excited, too itchy.  
 Leisure has been known to destroy both kings and 15  
 prosperous cities.  
 (poem 51)

The poem is a translation of one by Sappho, the seventh-century BC Greek poetess from Lesbos whose songs to female lovers gave rise to the word “Lesbian” and Catullus’ “Lesbia” (he chose the pseudonym for its association with Sappho’s poetic genius, not her homoeroticism). Catullus elsewhere uses this “Sapphic meter” (three eleven-syllable lines capped by a five-syllable line) only for poem 11, with which poem 51 is often paired; the shared phrase “over and over” (Latin *identidem*) emphasizes both the obsessiveness and the timelessness of the affair, the impossibility of arranging it in a logical temporal sequence (see Janan 1994: 71). Another poem closely linked with poem 51, however, poses another crucial interpretive question: was the inspiration for this Sapphic tour de force Catullus’ passion for Lesbia, or his passion for poetic tussling with a male friend (see Wray 2001: 95–100)? Poem 51 is preceded by a poem about male friendship and poetic creation, in which the aftereffects of a poetic sparring contest are portrayed in startlingly erotic terms; Catullus is “enflamed,” “in misery,” and unable to eat or sleep (50.7–10). He can find only one outlet:

But after my limbs, exhausted by their labor,  
 were lying half-dead upon the little bed, 15  
 delightful friend, I wrote this poem for you,  
 so from it you could clearly perceive my pain.  
 (50.14–17)

It is tantalizingly unclear whether “this poem” in line 16 refers to the poem it is in (50) or the poem that follows (51). The idea that poem 50 is a sort of “cover letter” for poem 51 is supported by a strong parallel with poems 65 and 66: like poem 51, poem 66 is a translation from a Greek author, and Catullus’ statement in poem 65, “I send you this poem” (*mitto haec . . . tibi carmina*, 65.15–16) – where “this poem” refers unambiguously to poem 66 – sounds suspiciously like the statement in poem 50, “I wrote this poem for you” (*hoc . . . tibi poema feci*, 50.16). We can at least say with certainty that poems 50 and 51 are thematically linked: the ending of 51, decrying the troubling effects of leisure (*otium*), recalls the situation of decadent “leisure” with which 50 opens, and the depiction of erotic distress is common to both.

Whatever the genesis of poem 51, the ominous prophecy with which it closes melds into an even darker chord in our final view of the polymetric Lesbia. As in poem 11, the poet depicts Lesbia’s betrayal as indiscriminate sexual rapacity, but this

time with the added humiliation represented by what the Romans considered the most degrading of sexual acts:

Caelius, our Lesbia, that Lesbia,  
that Lesbia whom alone Catullus loved  
more than himself and all his friends and family,  
now at every street-corner and back alley  
shucks great-hearted Remus's descendants.

(poem 58)

The last polymetric, though not addressed specifically to Lesbia, borrows the language and imagery of epic to show the depth of the poet's despair:

Did a lioness birth you in the mountains of Libya,  
or a Scylla, barking from the lowest depths of her loins –  
you, with your mind so hardened, so full of cruelty  
that you'd treat the final cry of a suppliant's despair  
with scorn, your heart as hard as that of a feral beast?

(poem 60)

That the affair that began (poetically speaking) with such tenderness should end with such degradation and callousness, the pet sparrow replaced by wild beasts, is quintessentially Catullan.

Before we move on to the next chapter in the story, two points about the polymetric Lesbia should be emphasized. First, she is characterized by hyperbole, especially numeric hyperbole. The poet demands hundreds and thousands of kisses (poem 5); he discusses the precise dimensions of their infinity (poem 7); he invites his comrades to accompany him to the ends of the earth to tell his *puella* she can go to hell with her three hundred lovers (poem 11); he threatens to irrumate two hundred blockheads on barstools (poem 37). Yet Lesbia is not the only inspiration for these numeric fantasies. In addition to *basiationes*, two more “-ation” words designating very large numbers of physical embraces appear in the polymetrics. The first is with a woman named Ipsitilla whom earlier ages might describe as “no better than she should be,” from whom Catullus is fishing for a post-prandial invitation:

I will love you, my sweet Ipsitilla,  
my cherished delight, my captivating charm:  
bid me come to you to take a siesta!  
And if you bid me, help in this way too:  
don't let anyone put the bolt in the door,  
and don't be pleased to go away outside,  
but you remain at home, and prepare for me  
nine continuous, uninterrupted fuckations (*fututiones*).

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(32.1–8)

Like *basiatio*, *fututio* appears only in Catullus and his imitator Martial; also like *basiatio*, it refers to a number most would consider unreasonably large for the act in question. A third polymetric “-ation” word is used of an adolescent boy, Juventius,

who in number of poems and depth of passion is Lesbia's chief rival for the poet's love, or lust – Latin *amor* covers both, and Juventius is twice called *meos amores*, “my love” (a term never used of Lesbia). This boy arouses in the poet an appetite for kisses not unlike that aroused by Lesbia in poems 5 and 7:

Oh, Juventius, your honey-sweet eyes,  
if someone should allow me to keep kissing them,  
I would kiss three hundred thousand times,  
and I would never, ever be seen to be gluttoned,  
not even if thicker than a ripened cornfield 5  
were to grow the crop of our osculations (*osculationes*).  
(poem 48)

The use of *basiatio*, *fututio*, and *osculatio* for hyperbolically large numbers of physical interactions with three different objects of *amor* can hardly be coincidental. One might note in passing the obvious double standard taken for granted in ancient Rome: multiple lovers for Lesbia meant betrayal, whereas multiple lovers for Catullus meant virility. Catullus sees (or professes to see) no contradiction between his love for Lesbia and his other sexual adventures. In fact, the intratextual connection forged by the three “-ations” invites the reader to “compare and contrast” them.

The second characteristic of the polymetric Lesbia is that she and the relationship are portrayed almost entirely in physical terms. With the exception of *basiationes* (poem 7) and her “witty vow” (poem 36), which are both likely to be the poet's own projections, the polymetrics contain not a single reference to Lesbia's mind. Her passion is represented by infinite kisses (poems 5, 7), her tenderness by swollen little eyes (poem 3), her allure by a perfume that would make one wish to be “totally nose” (poem 13), her betrayal by the grinding (poem 11) and shucking (poem 58) of her lovers' groins. The indirect description of her beauty is the negative of another woman's unappealing foot, nose, eyes, mouth, and tongue (poem 43). In short, there is little to suggest that she is more than a *puella*, a girl, whose physical attractiveness holds the poet in thrall. If her charms exceed those of a Juventius or an Ispitilla, the difference is essentially one of quantity, not quality. Even when Catullus portrays himself in a female role, as in the stunning gender reversals of poems 2 and 11, the affair does not transcend the boundaries of physical sexuality.

But the story does not end there.

## The Poem 68 Lesbia

With poem 68, considered by many “the most extraordinary poem in Latin” (Lyne 1980: 52; Feeney 1992: 33), Catullus completely changes the terms in which Lesbia is conceived. Poems 61–7 are all variations on the theme of marriage; in poem 68, Catullus and Lesbia enter into a pseudo-marriage that will set the tone for their relationship in the epigrams to follow.

The poem poses as a thank-offering to a friend of Catullus who provided his home as a trysting spot:

He with a broad path laid open a closed field,  
 he, he gave his home to me and to my mistress,  
 a place for us to exercise our mutual love.  
 (68.67–9)

The word “mistress” hardly seems worth a second glance; centuries of adultery in literature and life have caused it to mean a “woman who has a continuing sexual relationship with a man to whom she is not married” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, “mistress” 6). Yet the Latin word *domina* had not – yet – acquired that meaning for the Romans: it refers solely to a woman in control of slaves. With this line, Catullus plants the seed for a theme to blossom fully only in his poetic successors, the *servitium amoris* or “slavery of love,” which portrays the poet as the “slave” of a “mistress” in control of his heart. As he inverts gender relationships by casting himself as a deflowered maiden in poem 11, so here he inverts power relationships by casting himself as Lesbia’s slave.

A moment after introducing the slavery theme, Catullus endows his lover with two other provocative images absent from the polymetrics:

There with supple foot my radiant divinity 70  
 entered, and resting her gleaming sole on the smooth-worn threshold  
 she halted, with her sandal singing shrill,  
 just as Laodamia once, burning with love,  
 arrived at the home of Protesilaus, her husband,  
 a home commenced in vain. . . .  
 (68.70–5)

Lesbia’s arrival is at once the epiphany of a goddess – another metaphor to bear its fruit only in later poets – and the ceremonial entrance of a bride into her husband’s house. The tradition of carrying the bride over the threshold arose precisely to prevent such an ill-omened stumble or (as here) squeak of the shoe. With this image, Catullus recasts their relationship as a marriage – and an unlucky one, like that of Laodamia, the passionate bride of the first man to die in the Trojan War. After the most bizarre concatenation of similes to appear anywhere in Latin poetry (examined, fortunately, elsewhere in this volume by Theodorakopoulos, pp. 323–6), Catullus returns to the comparison of Lesbia with the unfortunate Laodamia:

My Light, then, who didn’t fall short of her at all –  
 or only a little – came into my lap;  
 Cupid flitting all around her, now here, now there,  
 gleamed in his saffron tunic radiantly.  
 (68.131–4)

His “radiant divinity” has now become his “Light,” and Cupid, wearing a tunic the color of wedding garments, appears to bless the “marriage.” Yet the epiphany, the wedding, and the comparison with the mythically amorous heroine are subverted by another dissonant note, another squeak of the sandal. The understated phrase “or only a little” reminds us that Lesbia is really neither divinity nor bride nor heroine, nor is her passion for Catullus (it is implied) equal to his for her.

The next lines reveal her as a flesh-and-blood adulteress who does not remain faithful even to her lover:

Even if she's not content with Catullus alone, 135  
 I'll bear the blushing lady's occasional cheating,  
 so I won't be pestering her too much like some clown.  
 Often even Juno, greatest of goddesses,  
 swallowed down her seething wrath at her husband's wrongs,  
 knowing all-lustful Jupiter's rampant cheating.  
 (68.135–40)

Lesbia is a “divinity,” it seems, not in being all-powerful, but in being “all-lustful.” Once again, the implicit equation of Lesbia with Jupiter and Catullus with the wronged Juno reinforces the inversion of power and gender relationships that characterizes the poem. After all the astonishing analogies, however, the poem sounds a note of realism bordering on cynicism:

Still, she didn't come to me to a home perfumed  
 with Assyrian scent, led by her father's hand,  
 but gave furtive little gifts in the amazing night, 145  
 stolen out of her very man's very lap.  
 Therefore it is enough, if I alone am granted  
 the day she marks with a more radiant stone.  
 (68.143–8)

Catullus in these lines makes explicit two points that are absent from the polymetrics but defining for the epigrams: what he has with Lesbia is both like and unlike a marriage, and she is in fact married to someone else. The poem closes with a benediction on the friends who made the relationship possible:

May both of you be happy, you and your Life together, 155  
 and the house where we had our game, my mistress and I,  
 and he who introduced her to me in the beginning,  
 from whom all good things first came into being,  
 and she who far before all is dearer to me than myself,  
 my Light: life is sweet to me while she's alive.  
 (68.155–60)

This ending encapsulates the paradox underlying Roman erotic poetry, whose inherently adulterous nature makes it an arena for intense emotions without real consequences. Though what Catullus and Lesbia have together is in a sense frivolous, a “game” (Latin *lusimus*, literally “we played”), this game and its player are dearer to the poet than life itself.

Poem 68, then, provides a crucial transition to the next movement in the Lesbia story. The polymetric *puella* – exclusively a sex object or subject – really had little to distinguish her from the polymetric *puer*, Juvenius. The relationship between a man and an adolescent boy was characterized by its artificiality and temporariness: once body hair took over, the relationship would end (sex of any kind between adult men is the subject of disgust and ridicule in Roman poetry). With poem 68, however,

Catullus creates for Lesbia an entirely different role, one characterized by divinity, power, and adulthood.

## The Epigrammatic Lesbia

In contrast to the polymetric Lesbia, with her schizophrenic variety of meters, generic experimentation (comedy, religious hymns, epistolography), and swings of tone, the epigrammatic Lesbia is quite simple. Catullus takes two dominant metaphors – marriage and political alliance – and spins them into a coherent narrative of betrayal, misery, and reconciliation, *in that order*. The turning point, as we have seen, is in poem 68, where amid evil omens, qualifications, and caveats, Catullus and Lesbia enter into a sort of marriage. Yet two other paths opened up by that extraordinary poem, Lesbia’s “divinity” and the “slavery of love,” turn out to be blind alleys, connoting as they do an inequality that would be symbolically incompatible with the mature relationship depicted in the epigrams. The wildly indulgent sensuality of the polymetrics is replaced by pure abstraction: though intertwined with overtly obscene material describing other people, the Lesbia epigrams contain not a single reference to any physical characteristic of or non-verbal action by Lesbia herself. Comic exaggeration has evaporated. The nameless hordes of lovers ground and shucked by the indefatigable polymetric *puella* are winnowed down in the epigrams to a handful of identifiable rivals, and buffoons like the urine-dentifriced coxcomb Egnatius (poem 37) are replaced by politically formidable opponents.

If the polymetric Lesbia cycle opened with the sweetness of awakening love (for all the ambiguity represented by the “sparrow”), the epigrams open (poem 69) with an outburst of acidic jealousy toward one “Rufus,” probably the M. Caelius Rufus who was a lover of Clodia Metelli (see Noonan 1979; Dettmer 1997: 151–69; Dyson forthcoming). This Rufus is ridiculed for the rancid goat that dwells in his armpits – just the sort of graphic physicality we have come to expect in the polymetrics. Yet when Lesbia herself enters the scene in the next poem, we find that the *puella* (“girl”) has become a *mulier* (“adult woman”), and indeed, one with whom the poet is talking about marriage:

My woman [*mulier*] says that there is no man she would rather marry  
than me, not even if Jove were to ask her himself.  
She says: but what a woman says to her longing lover  
ought to be written on wind and rushing water.

(poem 70)

We are confronted with yet another unanswerable interpretive question: Does this mean that Lesbia is in fact *available* – widowed, presumably, as we know the leading candidate for the “real” Lesbia to have been in 59 BC – or is it simply an exchange of sweet nothings, a contrafactual wish, “I would want to marry you if I weren’t married”? Later epigrams will refer to Lesbia’s husband, but given the scrambling of the affair’s temporal sequence, she could conceivably be unattached at the narrative moment of this one. What is clear, in any case, is that the pseudo-marriage of poem 68 has ushered in a new movement in the relationship, the possibility of a permanence alien to the *carpe diem* theme of the polymetrics.



The idea of marriage, however, is tame compared with the theme introduced in the next Lesbia poem, which contains one of the most shocking couplets (lines 3–4) in all of Latin love poetry:

Once you used to say that you knew Catullus alone,  
 Lesbia, and wouldn't want to hold Jove more than me.  
 I loved you then not just as the crowd love their girlfriend, but  
 as a father loves his sons and sons-in-law.  
 Now, I know you: so even if I burn more fiercely,                     5  
 yet you are much cheaper and shallower to me.  
 How can this be, you say? Because such injury forces  
 a lover to love more, but to wish well less.

(poem 72)

Comparing romantic love to filial or parental love is striking and perhaps hyperbolic, but not exactly revolutionary; such emotions are primal, spontaneous, and fierce, qualities one can easily see a passionate lover seeking to convey. But love for *sons-in-law* is something else entirely, a cultivated affection arising from a contractual relationship with political repercussions. Fathers chose spouses for their daughters to cement political alliances, not because they felt any emotion toward the projected mate. With the astonishing word “sons-in-law,” Catullus alerts us that the world of the sparrow has been left behind forever. Like the polymetric Lesbia, the epigrammatic Lesbia has power over the poet's heart, bringing him ecstasy through love and misery through betrayal – but the love and the betrayal have left the realm of pure sexuality and entered the realm of *amicitia*, “male friendship,” between intellectual and social equals (see Ross 1969: 80–94).

The next two Lesbia poems are similarly cerebral, devoid of specifics, and infused with the language of political alliance:

My mind has been dragged so far down, Lesbia, by your wrong,  
 and has so ruined itself by the favors it's done,  
 that now it could neither wish you well, if you became perfect,  
 nor stop loving you, if you did – everything.

(poem 75)

“Favor” (*officium*) and “wish well” (*bene velle*) are two key terms in the vocabulary governing the complex system of reciprocity that united the Roman aristocracy. Poem 76, by far the longest of the epigrams, spells out even more elaborately the sort of mutual responsibility that Catullus feels should characterize his relationship with Lesbia (*italics mine*):

If there is any pleasure for a person remembering  
*services* past, when he thinks how he is *righteous* [*pius*],  
 and has not broken a sacred *trust* or abused the power  
 of the gods to deceive people in any *pact*,  
 then many joys, Catullus, in a long life await you,                     5  
 joys arising out of this *thankless* love.  
 For all things people can *kindly do or say* to anyone,  
 these have been both done and said by you:

and all have gone sour, entrusted to a *thankless* heart.  
 Therefore, why should you torture yourself any more? 10  
 Why not toughen your heart and bring yourself back from there  
 and stop being miserable, since the gods are hostile?  
 It's hard to cast away a long love all of a sudden;  
 it's hard – but do it any way you can.  
 This is your only salvation, this is the fight you must win; 15  
 do this, whether it's possible or not.  
 Oh gods, if you have any heart, or if you have ever finally  
 given aid to those on the verge of death,  
 look upon me in my misery, and if I've lived a pure life,  
 snatch this plague and pestilence from me, 20  
 which creeps like numbing torpor into the depths of my limbs  
 and utterly drives the happiness from my heart.  
 No more do I ask for this – that she love me in return,  
 or (what is impossible) that she wish to be chaste:  
 I want to be healthy myself, and get rid of this foul sickness: 25  
 oh gods, grant me this in return for my *righteousness* [*pietas*].  
 (poem 76)

In poem 51, Catullus describes his love and jealousy as a sort of illness; to see and hear Lesbia talking to another man ravishes his *senses*, causing his ears to ring, his eyes to go black, and flame to ooze down within his limbs. Poem 76 reads more like a catalogue of symptoms of the displeasing plague of reactive depression (Booth 1997): the agony of pondering Lesbia's infidelity, despite the poet's attempts to win her "favor" by his "righteous" display of "services," causes not excitement but "numbing torpor." There is of course a sharp irony in using *pietas*, "righteousness" or "dutiful responsibility," to describe an adulterous relationship, but those are the terms Catullus gives us.

The polymetric Catullus and Lesbia exist in a sort of vacuum, a timeless, almost mythic world of thousands of kisses, hundreds of rivals. Their relationship with one another and with their friends and enemies and lovers is explored at length, but there is practically no mention of one of the primary realities of life, especially for the class-obsessed aristocratic Romans: family. The next Lesbia epigram, however, introduces this theme with a vengeance:

Lesbius is beautiful [*pulcher*]. Of course he is! Lesbia would choose him  
 over you, Catullus, with your whole family.  
 But yet this beautiful man would sell Catullus, with family,  
 if he could find three kisses from men who know him.  
 (poem 79)

The rumor of an incestuous relationship between P. Clodius Pulcher and his sister (or all his sisters) runs throughout Cicero's oratory, and this poem, as noted above, provides the most compelling internal evidence for identifying Lesbia as Clodia. The *puella* could have been anyone; the *mulier*, by contrast, is defined by her role as an adult within a close-knit aristocratic community. Incest represents not merely moral depravity, but a particular kind of snobbery that Catullus associates with social corruption, one of his predominant themes in the "elegiac *libellus*,"

poems 65–116 (Skinner 1982a, 2003). This Lesbia is not a demimondaine, an object of mere physical desire, but a member of a clan so willfully exclusive as to choose incest rather than going outside the family.

Once Lesbia's relationship with her brother has been clarified, Catullus proceeds to tell us, for the first time, about her relationship with her husband:

Lesbia hurls abuses at me in her husband's presence:  
 this is the summit of happiness for that dolt!  
 You ass, don't you get it? If she kept quiet, oblivious of me,  
 she would be healed: but now, since she snarls and curses,  
 not only does she remember, but – something fiercer by far –       5  
 she's furious! That is: she burns, and she speaks.  
 (poem 83)

With the mention of the man who makes a true “marriage” between Catullus and Lesbia impossible, paradoxically, the dawn begins to break in Catullus' emotional world. Lesbia's verbal abuse, the poet now realizes (or professes to realize), is really a sign of her love. The depressive seriousness of the previous poems, the bitterness at her insincerity and infidelity, have given way to a sense of hope and humor. Catullus is not out of the woods yet, as the next epigram, the only Lesbia poem to comprise a single couplet, gives a taut summary of the lover's perpetual dilemma:

I hate and I love. Why do I do this, you may well ask.  
 I don't know, but I feel it happen and it's torture.  
 (poem 85)

But the “torture” will prove cathartic. After this poem, the bitterness disappears. Armed with the knowledge that Lesbia's “abuse” of him is actually a good sign, the poet from this point on invokes the language of political alliance only to show the restoration of their *amicitia*, not its breach.

The comparison between Lesbia and another woman considered “beautiful to many” is especially revealing of the difference between the polymetric and the epigrammatic Lesbia:

Quintia is beautiful to many. In my eyes, she's radiant,  
 tall, good posture: I grant these single points.  
 I deny that the whole is beautiful. For no attractiveness,  
 not a grain of salt resides in so great a body.  
 Lesbia is beautiful; she is both entirely lovely,                       5  
 and alone has robbed all the Venus from all other women.  
 (poem 86)

In poem 43, Ameana was ridiculed for the inadequate beauty of her body parts, which the poet implied could not hold a candle to Lesbia's. In poem 86, the poet concedes that Quintia is physically beautiful, but – here is the crucial difference – he denies that physical beauty constitutes true “attractiveness” (*venustas*: see Krostenko 2001a: 40–51, and this volume). What Quintia lacks is “salt,” that is, “wit”: Lesbia, by implication, possesses this essential quality. Although this is Catullus' only explicit reference to Lesbia's mind, it highlights the metamorphosis in his depiction of their

relationship. The epigrammatic Lesbia has something more distinctive to offer than the perfume of sexual allure.

The five remaining Lesbia poems tell a simple story, one perhaps best summarized in the trite but timeless formula, “They lived happily ever after.”

No woman is able to say that she’s been loved so truly  
as my own Lesbia has been loved by me.  
No faith so great was ever found in any pact  
as has been found, from my side, in your love.  
(poem 87)

Lesbia’s always cursing me, and never keeps quiet  
about me: damned if Lesbia doesn’t love me!  
What proof? Because I’m exactly the same: I rail against her  
constantly – but damned if I don’t love her!  
(poem 92)

You think that I could hurl abuses at my Life,  
one who is dearer to me than both my eyes?  
I couldn’t – nor, if I could, would I love so desperately:  
but you, with Tappo, do all monstrous things.  
(poem 104)

If ever anything comes to a man who is longing, wishing,  
but hopeless – that is sweet to his spirit indeed!  
Therefore this is sweet to me, this is dearer than gold:  
you restore yourself, Lesbia, to me in my longing,  
you restore to a longing and hopeless man, on your own you return 5  
yourself to me. Oh day of more radiant note!  
What happier man lives than me only? Or who will be able  
to name a thing more to be wished in life than this?  
(poem 107)

You declare to me, my Life, that this our mutual love  
will be pleasant and last for all eternity.  
Great gods, see to it that she be able to promise truly,  
and that she say it sincerely and from the heart,  
so we may be allowed for our whole life to continue 5  
this everlasting pact of holy friendship.  
(poem 109)

Our final glimpse of the polymetric Lesbia is utter degradation, shucking all comers in back alleys. Our final glimpse of the epigrammatic Lesbia is in an “everlasting pact of holy friendship,” *amicitia*, a word denoting not only reconciliation but true equality. The *puella* has grown up.

## Coda

Catullus’ other “love,” Juventius, also undergoes a transformation between the polymetrics and the epigrams. In the polymetrics, while the poet was careful to jumble up the thousands of kisses with Lesbia, he made the mistake of naming a

round number for Juventius (three hundred thousand, to be exact, 48.3). It would seem that some snoop did reckon them up and place a nasty spell. Juventius, in his sole appearance in the epigrams, roundly punishes the poet's theft of a single little smooch (*suaviolum*, 99.2) by spending hours wiping the offending kiss from his lips, turning honey to gall. At the end, Catullus vows, "after this, I'll never steal kisses again" (99.16). Perhaps the *puer* has grown up as well. Has the poet?

## GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Wray (2001) offers a persuasive and theoretically sophisticated reading of Catullus' work as the "performance of Roman manhood," complementing the provocative analysis by Krostenko (2001a) of the "language of social performance" in Catullus and others. Skinner (2003) is an excellent treatment of the "elegiac *libellus*" (poems 65–116) as a coherent story. Dyson (forthcoming) provides translations (with commentary and some analysis) of all the ancient sources on Clodia, along with selected later elegies showing her legacy in the poetic tradition. Quinn (1973a) is still valuable as a scholarly commentary, although Garrison (2004) is a better fit for modern Latin students. Dettmer (1997) provides a stimulating analysis of the elaborate structure of Catullus' book. Ross (1969) and Wiseman (1985) present important essays on Catullus' cultural context. Gaisser (1993, 2001, and this volume) gives an excellent view of Catullus' afterlife in the Renaissance and beyond. Lyne (1980) is a good read on Latin love poetry in general, as is Richlin (1992) on Roman sexuality and aggression. Of articles, I have found Noonan (1979), Richlin (1981), Skinner (1982a, 1983), R. F. Thomas (1993), and Clauss (1995) especially enlightening; Quinn (1972a) is a fine compendium of earlier articles by a variety of authors.

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