

Spring 5-6-2014

# Eros the Man, Eros the Woman: Conflicting Identities and Gender Construction in the Catullan Corpus

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## Recommended Citation

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***Eros* the Man, *Eros* the Woman:  
Conflicting Identities and Gender  
Construction in the Catullan Corpus**

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Submitted May 6, 2014

*To Grandma,  
who taught me the value of  
education and persistence*

*Ave atque vale*

We hear a good deal from Catullus about his joys, griefs, and passions, but in the end we have hardly any idea of what he was really like.

Richard Jenkyns, *Three Classical Poets*, 84

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## Abstract

The Catullan corpus is filled with widely varying and often incompatible constructions of gender. These contradictions reveal latent tensions between the poet's masculine persona and personal pleasure, the latter of which often results in feminine modes of expression. Catullus' poetic voice frequently transgresses traditional Roman boundaries between gender spheres, emphasizing the nebulous nature of ancient sexuality. Through an analysis of the gendered paradigms that inform the Catullan corpus, this paper examines these tensions between traditional masculine and feminine roles and ways in which these roles are reversed, especially in Catullus' relationship with Lesbia. This paper analyzes Sapphic influences in Catullus (*carmina* 51 and 11), arguing that Catullus both embraces more feminine imagery in following with Sapphic tradition and within the same poems diverges from this tradition in favor of more masculine modes of expression. Catullus also transgresses Roman gender boundaries in *carmen* 76 by introducing the homosocial concept of *pietas* into his personal romantic relationships. Other poems exhibit more masculine traits (*carmina* 16 and 37), employing hypermasculinity and invective in order to reestablish the sexual dominance and masculine status that has been partially lost through gendered role reversals between Catullus and Lesbia in other poems. Transgressions of gender boundaries are also explored in *carmen* 63 which describes Attis' aborted transition from *ephebe* to man. Overall, Catullus' ever-changing voice emphasizes the ambiguity of ancient gender and sexuality as well as his own tensions regarding his place in both the masculine sphere and his personal relationships.

## Section I: Catullus' Rome

Catullus has long captured the imagination and interest of Classical scholars and popular audiences, and for much of the past two centuries treatments of Catullus have focused on the poet's "candid, universally human responses to circumstance."<sup>1</sup> However, as Marilyn B. Skinner has argued, placing Catullus within a context so close to our own has an unintended effect of hindering an understanding and appreciation of his poems within their own particular social and historical context.<sup>2</sup> With the 1986 publication of T.P. Wiseman's landmark work, *Catullus and His World*, appropriately subtitled "A Reappraisal," the scholarly conversation surrounding the Catullan corpus shifted focus. The past thirty years in Catullan scholarship represent a significant departure from previous research, as scholars have begun investigating Catullus' provincial background, dealings with the elite, and his references to everyday matters in order to ground the poet in an appropriate context.

Written at the end of the Roman Republic, during one of the most turbulent times in Roman history, Catullus' poetry, while possessing many personal emotions to which a modern audience can easily relate, not only deals with the poet's personal life but also comes into contact with his masculine reputation, especially, as I will discuss, gendered tensions between civic and personal. In the Catullan corpus, masculine and feminine spheres inform and influence one another, and Catullus' seemingly innocuous and trivial *versiculi* often have more serious implications which reflect broader tensions between his personal and civic interests. As Catullus himself wrote in poem 16, *nam castum esse decet pium poetam ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est.*<sup>3</sup> This desire to separate himself from the themes in his poetry reverberates throughout the

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<sup>1</sup> Marilyn B. Skinner, *A Companion to Catullus* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007a), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Carmen* 16: "For it's proper for a dutiful poet to be chaste himself, but it's not necessary for his poems." All translations are my own unless otherwise noted, and all versions of the Latin are taken from Garrison (2004). For a

Catullan corpus, as the narrator attempts to distinguish between his personal and public personas.<sup>4</sup> Most challenging in his attempt to do so is his relationship with Lesbia, whom Catullus portrays as constantly confounding his sense of masculinity and traditional gender roles, perhaps as a method of exploring the author's own tensions regarding ancient conceptions of gender and sexuality and his relationship with Greek poetic traditions.

Catullus' voice is often contradictory, hardly lending itself to a universalizing analysis. While one may wish to categorize Catullus' poetry into one gendered voice or the other, Catullus' poetry strongly resists a dichotomy of this nature. However, as will be shown, the recognition and understanding of these contradictions can be useful in investigating the gendered tensions between Catullus' civic or masculine persona and his personal relationships. While a personal relationship does not necessarily imply feminine rather than masculine traits, these relationships in the Catullan corpus often lead the poet to more feminine forms of expression, such as role reversals between Catullus and Lesbia, a passive or submissive tone, and the use of flower imagery. I posit that these tensions complicate the poet's narrative voice by articulating both a duty to follow the ideal model of masculinity according to his civic duty and a desire to follow his inclinations towards *eros* in his private life, inclinations which, for Catullus, frequently result in feminine expressions and gendered role reversals.

While this paper will attempt to reach an understanding concerning the tensions surrounding the construction of gender within the Catullan corpus, it is impossible to speak to the actual intentions of its author. The degree to which the content of his poems follows a true historical or biographical account is not as important here as the social *mores* and attitudes

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more detailed discussion of the separation between the poet and his voice, see Phyllis Young Forsyth, "Catullus: The Mythic Persona," *Latomus* 35, no. 3 (1976): 555-566.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this paper, by "Catullus" I mean more specifically the poet's voice within his work, not the actual person.

towards gender, sexuality, and public life that affect Catullus' voice in his poems. In fact, as we shall see in the poems, Catullus often hints at a separation between himself and the content of his poetry, suggesting that the emotions and individual gender transgressions seen in the poems are not at all indicative of the poet's own attitudes. Rather, Catullus' poetry and the distance it allows between the man and his poetic persona give the author a lens through which he can examine and explore individual transgressions between carefully policed boundaries of masculine and feminine.

These attitudes are heavily influenced by new movements within poetry happening around Catullus' lifetime. Considered one of the *poetae novi* or *neoteri*, Catullus belongs to a school of poets who drastically diverge from previous literature, representing a bold shift away from traditional epic poetry towards relatively short poems describing intense personal emotions and everyday occurrences. The *poetae novi* drew much of their inspiration from Hellenistic poets such as Callimachus as well as from Archaic Greek poets, especially Sappho, and Catullus himself draws heavily from Sappho's poetic legacy in his explorations of gender boundaries and his relationship with Lesbia. This proximity to Greek culture and poetic traditions, typically viewed as foreign and effeminate within a Roman mindset, further complicates Catullus' masculine persona.

Over the course of this paper, I hope to bring to light Catullus' attitudes and *mores* influenced by the *neoteri* through a close reading of several of Catullus' poems, progressing through various themes within the corpus such as masculine and feminine qualities and, of course, the famous Lesbia. Through a close analysis of the gendered paradigms in Catullus' poetry and by drawing on the work of such important Catullan scholars as Marilyn B. Skinner, Ellen Greene, and David Wray, among others, I hope to show how attitudes towards masculinity

and traditional gender roles at the end of the Republic can be used to understand the individual's gendered tensions within the Catullan corpus.

Ultimately, Catullus' construction of gender within his poetry defies categorization into a strict dichotomy. What is certain, however, is that Catullus' poetry reveals latent tensions concerning his masculine persona and personal pleasure, especially concerning excess, and his poems constantly transgress gender and social boundaries, blurring the lines between masculine and feminine as well as challenging traditional conceptions of *eros* within a poetic context heavily influenced by Greek tradition. Catullus' ever-changing voice emphasizes the nebulous nature of an individual's sexuality in antiquity and the ability to shift back and forth between being considered masculine or feminine. The category-defiant poetry within the Catullus corpus also expresses Catullus' own tensions regarding his place in both the masculine sphere and his personal relationships as he attempts to navigate these carefully policed boundaries of masculinity and femininity.

## Section II: Roman Standards of Masculinity

Before we examine the poems, a brief explanation of Roman attitudes concerning gender and sexuality will aid in the understanding of the gendered tensions extant in the Catullan corpus. This is, of course, an immense topic, and in no way will I attempt to undertake a full description of gender and sexuality in the late Republic.<sup>5</sup> However, this section will endeavor to illuminate several specific aspects of gender and sexuality in Roman culture which will be referenced in later analysis of the poems. While ancient gender categories of masculine and feminine were strictly defined, an individual's gender identity was more fluid, mainly due to inherent ties to dominance and power.<sup>6</sup> The categories of "male" and "female" were closely aligned with one's sexual role as either penetrator or penetrated, but also encompassed the possession of other traits such as self-control and reason (*continentia* and *ratio*).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, depending on an individual's behavior, he could be considered masculine at one time and feminine at another, shifting between the two based on his actions. These roles "replicate and even confirm social superiority or inferiority," directly tying one's sexual life and preferences with one's reputation and status in society.<sup>8</sup>

Masculinity, then, was an achieved state, attained once a Roman man had proven his ability to control both his personal and civic life, and as an achieved rather than permanent state, it was also possible to revert back to a feminine status. As Marilyn Skinner explains:

True masculinity, the sexual posture of the dominant erotic agent or penetrator, is attained only at maturity, after an adolescent has passed through the stage of erotic passivity and objectification (i.e., feminization) triggered by the onset of puberty. Male status, the prerogative of the citizen and the head of the household,

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of gender and sexuality, see Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Marilyn B. Skinner, "Ego mulier: The Construction of Male Sexuality in Catullus," in *Catullus*, ed. Julia Haig Gaisser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007c): 455.

<sup>7</sup> Other ways of considering this gendered dichotomy are active and passive or dominator and submitter.

<sup>8</sup> Skinner, "Ego mulier: The Construction of Male Sexuality in Catullus," 456.

is a function of age as well as of sex, hinging upon control... To maintain that status, constant physiological and psychological vigilance is required. Any loss of physical vigor... can weaken the bulwarks of masculinity and cause reversion to a passive 'womanish' condition. Ancient masculinity is thus intrinsically unstable and always at risk...<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned, masculinity encompassed more than merely acting as sexual aggressor or penetrator. Roman masculinity was also characterized by *continentia*, self-control over one's passions and desires, and *virtus*, virtue categorized by manliness, valor, and excellence, carrying with it a connotation of male strength. In addition, elite Roman men were primarily concerned with homosocial relations,<sup>10</sup> or those that prioritize interactions between elite Roman men in order to display one's masculine excellence in relation to other elite men. Women and femininity, on the other hand, were categorized by a passive sexual role as well as the possession of traits such as *mollitia*, "softness," characterized by delicacy and weakness. Femininity also implied excessive desire and self-indulgence, particularly with respect to sexual appetites. Passivity was not merely a sexual role but also a "breakdown of self-discipline" and a "bankruptcy of will."<sup>11</sup> Thus, Roman men (specifically adult male citizens)<sup>12</sup> not only had to protect their bodies from sexual penetration, since this would have resulted in instant feminization and loss of status,<sup>13</sup> but also from verbal accusations of effeminate actions such as excess and loss of control.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 456.

<sup>10</sup> I take this term from Sedgwick (1985).

<sup>11</sup> Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 212.

<sup>12</sup> Roman class structures necessitated a more complicated understanding of social stratification and sexuality than in Ancient Greece, where adult manhood was the most important requirement for social dominance. Non-citizen men, including freedmen and slaves, were still considered effeminate as slaves were expected to be always sexually available to their masters, even after becoming a freedman or freedwoman upon manumission. Furthermore, non-citizens were not legally protected from physical beating and sexual penetration. Even male citizens could be excluded from this protection, however, if they were accused of sexual misconduct (e.g. being sexually penetrated) and deemed disreputable. See Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 195.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, adult male citizens were legally protected from sexual penetration and beating or torture, emphasizing this importance the purity of one's physical body held for social status. See Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 195.

Since masculinity encompassed so many traits that could easily be lost, if only in a temporary lapse, while masculine and feminine roles themselves were carefully policed boundaries, an individual's sexuality was more nebulous and could frequently shift back and forth between the two spheres based on his actions in public and at home. This anxiety over the potential loss of masculinity and therefore social status is a prevalent theme in Catullus' poetry, one that will be addressed throughout this paper. By embracing his desires towards *eros* within his poetry, Catullus expresses tension between traditional gender roles, taking on a more feminine persona. However, in other poems I will examine, Catullus' poetic voice marks its transgressions and scolds itself, overcompensating for his feminine digressions with hypermasculine invective. Therefore, in this paper I will not discuss merely feminine or masculine voices in Catullan poetry, but rather feminine constructs complicated by the poet's masculine identity, and vice versa.

The relationship with Lesbia as depicted in Catullus' poetry proves to be a complicating factor in maintaining a masculine voice. Men in ancient Rome feared women's potential power to control men through sexual desire and pleasure,<sup>14</sup> and Catullus' poetry has many instances of role reversal, in which Lesbia's sexuality and beauty overpower the masculine Catullan voice. Women were necessarily trapped in a passive sexual role, and this form of submission reverberated through every aspect of a woman's life. The two most egregious forms of immorality consisted of excess and passivity, and women were confined to both.<sup>15</sup> As Marilyn Skinner observes, "[f]rom a medical and ethical standpoint, sex was both natural and necessary, but the gratification it brought, being so intense, was open to misuse."<sup>16</sup> As mentioned previously, popular conceptions of masculinity included the possession of self-mastery

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<sup>14</sup> See Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 200-207.

<sup>15</sup> Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

(*continentia*), which allowed men to supervise their home and perform civic duties. This self-mastery, however, did not extend to women, who were constantly seeking sexual gratification due to their (perceived) insatiable sexual appetite. Furthermore, women posed a serious threat to a man's self-mastery by enticing him to indulge overly in physical pleasure, abandoning moderation and becoming himself effeminate (*mollis*).

Furthermore, as Catharine Edwards has argued, Roman conceptions of *mollitia* were not confined merely to a binary of active and passive roles.<sup>17</sup> Masculinity in ancient Rome encompassed much more than simply assuming an active sexual role, and men who acted solely within the active role could still be considered effeminate, as we shall see in Catullus' relationship with Lesbia. In light of other sources we have mocking prominent Roman citizens for feminine conduct, it is no wonder that Catullus would be anxious to assert his masculinity and sexual authority in his poetry, a task complicated by its Greek (and therefore more effeminate, according to Roman conceptions) poetic roots. In Plutarch's biography of Pompey, the general is portrayed as effeminate for being over-fond of his wife:

ταχὺ μέντοι καὶ αὐτὸς ἐμαλάσσετο τῷ τῆς κόρης ἔρωτι καὶ προσεῖχεν ἐκείνη τὰ πολλὰ καὶ συνδιημέρευεν ἐν ἀγροῖς καὶ κήποις, ἡμέλει δὲ τῶν κατ' ἀγορὰν πραττομένων, ὥστε καὶ Κλώδιον αὐτοῦ καταφρονῆσαι δημαρχοῦντα τότε καὶ θρασυτάτων ἄψασθαι πραγμάτων...προελθόντος αὐτοῦ πρὸς τινα δίκην, ἔχων ὑφ' αὐτῷ πλῆθος ἀνθρώπων ἀσελγείας καὶ ὀλιγορίας μεστὸν αὐτὸς μὲν εἰς ἐπιφανῆ τόπον καταστάς ἐρωτήματα τοιαῦτα προὔβαλλε: 'τίς ἐστὶν αὐτοκράτωρ ἀκόλαστος; τίς ἀνὴρ ἄνδρα ζητεῖ; τίς ἐνὶ δακτύλῳ κνᾶται τὴν κεφαλὴν;' οἱ δέ...ἐφ' ἐκάστῳ μέγα βοῶντες ἀπεκρίναντο: 'Πομπήϊος.'

Soon, however, Pompey himself weakly succumbed to his passion for his young wife, devoting himself almost exclusively to her, spending his time with her in villas and gardens and neglecting affairs of the forum. One result of this was that even Clodius, who was at that time a tribune of the *plebs*, despised him and undertook the most daring measures...So when Pompey made an appearance at a public trial, Clodius, accompanied by a mob of rude and insolent villains, took up a conspicuous place and put them questions of the following kind: "Who is the

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<sup>17</sup> See Catharine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 84.

general with no self-control?”, “Who is the man who runs after other men?”, “Who scratches his head with one finger?”<sup>18</sup> ...They would reply to each question, shouting out “Pompey!” (Plut. *Pomp.* 48.5-7)<sup>19</sup>

Pompey’s focus on his personal life, particularly his young wife, was thus perceived to cause him to neglect civic affairs and lose his self-control, leading to accusations of effeminacy. In a similar manner, womanizers and perpetual adulterers were also placed in this effeminate category, as they lacked *continentia*. The fact that Publius Clodius Pulcher was leading the mockery should be especially telling of Pompey’s behavior, as Clodius himself was an alleged transvestite. He was accused of disguising himself as a woman in order to sneak into the female-only ceremony of the Bona Dea with the intention of seducing Julius Caesar’s wife, making him in the eyes of many the archetypal adulterer and a symbol of the disorder that characterized the end of the Republic.<sup>20</sup>

Catullus’ poetry echoes many of these societal issues, and the presence of both masculine and feminine identities within a poetic context helps the poet to explore tensions between the domain of poetry and Roman public life, drawing into question Catullus’ identity as a wholly masculine Roman. This paper will attempt to trace some of these gendered paradigms, connecting them to popular conceptions of the ideal masculine role and Roman notions of proper gender roles. The first section will cover anxieties expressed by Catullus’ poetic voice over the dangers of excess<sup>21</sup> and loss of masculinity, specifically investigating Sapphic elements of Catullus and how Catullus’ use of a Greek female poet as a muse reveals feminine characteristics within Catullus’ poetry. The second section will discuss hypermasculine traits in the Catullan

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<sup>18</sup> Scratching the head with one finger was considered an effeminate action in ancient Rome. See also Plut. *Iul.* 4.4 for Cicero’s derision of Caesar on account of this gesture.

<sup>19</sup> Trans. Edwards (1993). The text is also from Edwards.

<sup>20</sup> See Suet. *Iul.* 6.2 and Plut. *Caes.* 9.1-10.11.

<sup>21</sup> Particularly *otium*, which was not itself considered feminine, but an excessive amount of *otium* could become dangerous (see *carmen* 51).

corpus, specifically his invectives, examining Catullus' construction of his own masculine poetic persona in relation to the complicated relationship with Lesbia in his poetry.

### Section III: Catullus as Woman

#### *Sapphic Influences and the Dangers of Excess*

Catullus not only uses the name “Lesbia” as a pseudonym for his famous *puella*, a clear reference to Sappho, who lived on the island of Lesbos around the sixth century BCE, but he also peppers his entire corpus with more subtle nods to the poet, such as his use of the Sapphic strophe meter and his epithalamia.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, Catullus highly admired Sappho and her poetry; the more important issue here, however, is the reason behind Catullus’ use of Sappho’s name and reputation and the ways in which the use of a Greek woman’s poetic tradition complicates the masculine voice in Catullus’ poetry. Through a close analysis of several poems, both those which clearly emulate Sappho and others which are not as overtly tied to her tradition, the feminine aspects of Catullus’ poetry and the ways in which his female identity competes with his masculine one will be made clearer.

#### *Carmen 51*

As one of the Neoteric poets, Catullus belonged to a tradition that venerated the Greek poetic tradition, and our poet was no exception to this culture of Greek reverence, working from lyric and Hellenistic traditions, especially the Archaic poet Sappho. Sapphic influences are scattered throughout his poetry, most obviously in his chosen pseudonym for his mistress, *Lesbia*, evoking both Sappho and the island on which she lived. As T.P. Wiseman states:

Lesbos was traditionally associated with refinement and sophistication, for example in music, poetry and dress. Above all, it was the home of Sappho, whose poetry exemplified that refinement and celebrated that beauty...Sappho’s work appealed to Catullus, with its emphasis on love, marriage, and the world of

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<sup>22</sup> See especially 11 and 51 for Sapphic strophe and 61 and 62 for epithalamia. For more on Catullus’ wedding hymns, see Eva Stehle Stigers, “Retreat from the Male: Catullus 62 and Sappho’s Erotic Flowers,” *Ramus* 6 (1977): 82-102 and Ole Thomsen, *Ritual and Desire: Catullus 61 and 62 and Other Ancient Documents on Wedding and Marriage* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1992).

emotions. It is not difficult to see why he chose to disguise his beloved as 'Lesbia'.<sup>23</sup>

Catullus uses Sappho as his muse, developing and expanding her poetic legacy. The two poems written in Sapphic strophe, 11 and 51, represent an almost-complete cycle of Catullus' relationship with Lesbia. *Carmen* 51 is often interpreted as the first meeting between the two and 11 is one of the final poems in the cycle, a curse written to Lesbia stating the loss of Catullus' love for her.<sup>24</sup> 51, a translation of one of Sappho's original poems, serves as a prime example both of Catullus' masculinization of a work originally composed with a female voice and of his own feminine voice. Although Catullus' translation at first glance appears to be a faithful Latin copy of the original, save perhaps for the final stanza, a closer reading will reveal numerous subtle (and not so subtle) changes to Sappho's poem which significantly alter the tone of the work. These differences can be traced not only to Catullus' separation from Sappho in time, space, and culture but also, more importantly, to his conceptions of and experiences with the Roman masculine ideal.

Before we look at Catullus' poem in relation to Sappho's, it is important first to discuss Sappho 31, as it was composed half a millennium prior to Catullus' translation and therefore was consumed by multiple generations of Greeks and Romans before Catullus ever translated it. Sappho's original poem has been widely interpreted as an epithalamion, sung to the bride at the entrance of her nuptial chamber, which itself introduces the public idea of marriage into a private moment between husband and wife.<sup>25</sup> Just as Catullus' poetry subverts traditional notions of gender, Sappho's poem also challenges typical Greek conceptions of femininity. However, as

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<sup>23</sup> T.P. Wiseman, *Catullus and His World: A Reappraisal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 135.

<sup>24</sup> While many scholars have argued that *carmen* 51 marks the beginning of the Lesbia cycle, others hold that Catullus himself arranged the corpus and the poems are meant to be read in numeric order. See Skinner (2007b), Ferguson (1986a), Ferguson (1986b), and Quinn (1973). Cf. Wheeler (1936), Dettmer (1997), and Wiseman (1985).

<sup>25</sup> See Paul Allen Miller, "Sappho 31 and Catullus 51: The Dialogism of Lyric," in *Catullus*, ed. Julia Haig Gaisser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 478-81.

will be seen in our analysis of the two poems, Sappho eschews interaction with her male rival in favor of focusing on her personal relationship with the object of the speaker's desire (the bride, if we are interpreting the poem as a wedding song), while Catullus constantly introduces notions of the Roman ideal of masculinity into his frenzied and excessive desire (more feminine qualities) for the woman in the poem.

Φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν  
ἔμμεν' ὄνηρ, ὅττις ἐναντιός τοι  
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδῃ φωνεί-  
σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἡμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν  
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·  
ὥς γὰρ <ἔς> σ' ἴδω βρόχε' ὥς με φώνη-  
σ' οὐδὲν ἔτ' εἴκει,

ἀλλά καμὲν γλῶσσα ἔαγε, λεπτόν  
δ' αὐτίκα χρωὶ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν,  
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδὲν ὄρημ', ἐπιβρό-  
μεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

ἔκαδε μ' ἴδρωσ' κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ  
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωποτέρα δὲ ποίας  
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης  
φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐταί.

ἀλλὰ πᾶν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ καὶ πένητα

He seems to me equal to the gods that man  
whoever he is who opposite you  
sits and listens close  
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it  
puts the heart in my chest on wings  
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking  
is left in me;

no: tongue breaks and thin  
fire is racing under skin  
and in eyes no sight and drumming  
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking  
 grips me all, greener than grass  
 I am and dead—or almost  
     I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty<sup>26</sup>

Sappho's entire poem subverts typical Greek notions of femininity, as the involuntary physical reactions Sappho has to the woman in the poem, normally a sign of weakness, become reworked. Sappho alters epic conventions describing how Homeric men react to fear in battle to "express *eros* rather than fear," not only marking herself, a woman, with strength but also propelling herself above the fearful Greek soldiers in epic.<sup>27</sup> Greek notions of femininity posited that women are highly susceptible to desire and lack *eukratia*, self-mastery, a necessary component of Greek masculinity. Sappho, however, proves herself unaffected in the final line, instead stating that *πάν τόλματον* ("all must be dared"). This theme of unconventionality in Sappho's poetry carries over to Catullus' translation as well, but is further transformed to suit the Roman poet's own agenda.

Upon comparative analysis of the two poems, Catullus' is the one that exudes more traits of civic duty, while Sappho's poem remains relatively personal, focused on the intimate relationship between the speaker and the beloved, a difference potentially caused by each author's distinct cultural background, but also by their different genders and the societal concerns circumscribed by Greek and Roman constructions of gender.

Ille mi par esse deo videtur,  
 ille, si fas est, superare divos,  
 qui sedens adversus identidem te  
     spectat et audit

<sup>26</sup> Trans. Carson (2002). The Greek text is also taken from Carson. I have kept her original formatting for the translation.

<sup>27</sup> Christina A. Clark, "The Poetics of Manhood? Non-Verbal Behavior in Catullus 51," *Classical Philology* 103 (2008): 260-1.

dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis  
eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,  
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi  
vocis in ore 5

lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus  
flamma demanat, sonitu suopte  
tintinant aures, gemina teguntur  
lumina nocte. 10

Otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est:  
otio exsultas nimiumque gestis:  
otium et reges prius et beatas  
perdidit urbes. 15

That one seems to me a god, that one, if it is allowed, seems to surpass the gods, who, sitting across sees and hears you again and again laughing sweetly, which snatches away all sensation from miserable me: for as soon as I catch sight of you, Lesbia, no voice is left in my mouth but tongue is paralyzed, a thin flame runs down under limbs, ears ring out with their own sound, eyes are covered by a twin night. Idleness, Catullus, is troublesome for you: in idleness you rejoice and delight too much. Idleness has destroyed both kings and magnificent cities before.

As Ellen Greene points out in her insightful article, “Re-figuring the Feminine Voice: Catullus Translating Sappho,” the very first words of Sappho and Catullus’ respective poems distinguish the difference between the two.<sup>28</sup> While Sappho begins with the phrase φαίνεται μοι (“it seems to me”), which places the emphasis on the perceiver and not the ὄνερ (man), who appears as κῆνος in the first line, following second after φαίνεται μοι, Catullus begins with the demonstrative *ille* (“that man”), clearly marking the male rival rather than the female beloved as the person of interest in the poem. Sappho quickly transitions from discussing the ὄνερ to focusing on the personal relationship between the speaker and her beloved. The ὄνερ is quickly forgotten as Sappho describes the effect the woman in the poem has on her: her heart ἐπτόαισεν (“flutters”), her γλῶσσα ἔαγε (“tongue breaks”), she is utterly destroyed (ὀλίγω) by the presence of the woman before her. The ὄνερ mentioned is not a rival for Sappho but simply serves as a point of

<sup>28</sup> Ellen Greene, “Re-figuring the Feminine Voice: Catullus Translating Sappho,” *Arethusa* 32 (1999), 1-18.

comparison to the immense effect the woman has on Sappho. He must be ἴσος θεοῖσιν (“equal to the gods”) in order to have the capacity to sit beside such a woman unaffected. His calm collectedness throws into high relief Sappho’s reaction, but then immediately fades into the background, emphasizing Sappho’s relationship with, and reaction to, the woman.

Catullus’ primary relationship in the poem, on the other hand, is with the male rival rather than Lesbia.<sup>29</sup> While Sappho dismisses the ὄνειρ early on, ignoring outside society and preferring to focus on her personal relationship with the object of her affection, Catullus introduces civic attitude and opinion as early as line 2 with the phrase *si fas est*.<sup>30</sup> The term *fas* means “proper” or “right” in the sense of divine law and is heavily tied to the will of the gods and one’s obligation to them. The difference in gender and culture is reflected in this phrase, as Catullus’ poetic voice is clearly concerned with how his relationship with the woman in the poem (and possibly his relationship with Greek poetry and culture in general) will affect his proximity to the Roman construction of male sexuality, specifically his duties and obligations as a Roman male. Lesbia’s immediate control over Catullus deprives him of his dominant, active status from the beginning of their relationship, and this loss of control prompts the anxiety over proper masculine behavior and the blending of traditional gender roles that pervade the remainder of the Lesbia poems.

This anxiety is continued in the final stanza, Catullus’ major departure from the original poem.<sup>31</sup> Where Sappho focuses on her own reaction to the woman, Catullus’s poem is preoccupied throughout with a tension between *negotium* and *otium*. While *otium* itself was not considered a feminine enterprise, Romans regarded an excess of any quality or activity,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>30</sup> See Greene (1999) for a more in-depth discussion of *fas* in *carmen* 51.

<sup>31</sup> It is worth mentioning, however, that as the entire original work does not survive, it is possible that Catullus could be translating or reinterpreting another stanza of the original poem by Sappho.

including *otium*, as a lack of *continentia*, or self-mastery. As with Pompey's lack of self-control with his new wife (Plut. *Pomp.* 48.5-7), a lack of *continentia* signified a more feminine than masculine personality. The powerful effect Lesbia has over Catullus renders him unable to function normally (lines 5-12). While Sappho's final line, fragmentary as it is, continues the erotic theme of the poem, overturning Greek stereotypes of proper feminine behavior, Catullus' last stanza dramatically departs from the previous three, eschewing erotic abandon for practical sensibility. In the final stanza, it almost appears as if the poet has woken up from a period of brief insensibility, chiding himself for his lapse in judgment and for forgetting his civic duty and image. Catullus is suddenly reminded of the need to present himself as a confident man fully in control of his own masculinity. It is not necessarily the *otium* that is dangerous for Catullus (in fact, *otium* was considered an elite and respectable period of rest after work in the civic or political sphere), but instead it is the excess to which Lesbia drives Catullus that he fears.

Sappho's voice here is especially meaningful, as she represents not only effeminate Greek culture and its poetic tradition, but is herself a woman. Although Sappho does subvert traditional gender roles many times throughout her poetry, her legacy is that of a "dangerous" woman who threatens male constructions of sexuality by reversing expectations. These threats, both of Lesbia's influence over Catullus and what Sappho symbolizes, allude to a danger not only in Catullus' personal life but also to his reputation in his civic, masculine life. The first three stanzas emphasize Lesbia's power over Catullus and his loss of *ratio*, and it is this excess of emotions that threatens Catullus' masculine status. According to Cicero, the root of all perturbations is excess or want of moderation (*intemperantia*),<sup>32</sup> and when the mind is not controlled by *ratio* but instead by desire, it "becomes dominated either by an idea of good or by

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<sup>32</sup> See Cic. *Tusc.* 3.10.23-11.25.

an idea of evil, and so is afflicted by the impulses of *cupido*, *libido*, *metus*, and *aegritu*.”<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, the Roman Epicurean Lucretius condemns not only the lust Cicero describes but also *amor*, arguing that love leads to *alterius sub nutu degitur aetas* (life spent under the rule of another).<sup>34</sup>

The passion with which Catullus reacts to seeing Lesbia in *carmen* 51 robs him of his reason, and he is instead controlled by these dangerous and potentially feminizing impulses of *eros* and *amor*. Catullus’ other poems also allude to the pain the loss of *ratio* brings, such as poem 85: *Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris? nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior* (“I hate and I love. Why do I do this, perhaps you ask? I do not know, but I feel it happening and I am tortured”). This poem, famous for its force and brevity, emphasizes the effect Lesbia has had on the poet. The synchysis in the second line, alternating between the active and passive voices (*nescio, fieri, sentio, excrucior*), confuses the status of Catullus’ poetic voice; is he active and masculine, or passive and feminine? Catullus’ wide-ranging emotions have taken over in this poem, and he cannot even decide if he hates or loves Lesbia. This is the excessive passion which Cicero and Lucretius condemn, and against which Catullus warns himself in the final stanza of poem 51. The second line of the stanza reveals that it is not merely *otium* which is *molestum*; it is that Catullus delights too much (*nimum*) in leisure and in allowing himself to be overcome by *amor*, as Lucretius warns. This stanza, a probable departure from the original Sappho, reveals traditional Roman concepts on proper male behavior such as *dignitas* and *pietas*, concepts which Catullus’ *eros* and *amor* influence, or even threaten to destroy. Catullus’ masculine status is at stake here, and even in *carmen* 51, at (arguably) the beginning of his relationship with Lesbia,

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<sup>33</sup> “Lust, desire, fear, and sickness.” R.I. Frank, “Catullus 51: Otium Versus Virtus,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 99 (1968): 233.

<sup>34</sup> Lucr. *De Rerum Natura* 4.1122.

the poet stops to remind himself of the implications which the actions in his personal relationships have.

*Carmen 11*

One other poem in the Catullan corpus, 11, is also written in Sapphic strophe and showcases Catullus' transgression of traditional Roman gender spheres. Catullus begins with a confident masculine voice, but then as the poem continues he slowly loses his masculine agency and becomes more aligned with the feminine. Ultimately, however, I wish to show that Catullus does not fully occupy either sphere, situating himself instead in a liminal space between the two.

Furi et Aureli, comites Catulli, sive in extremos penetrabit Indos, litus ut longe resonante Eoã tunditur unda,	
sive in Hyrcanos Arabasve molles, seu Sagas sagittiferosve Parthos, sive quae septemgeminus colorat aequora Nilus,	5
sive trans altas gradietur Alpes, Caesaris visens monimenta magni, Gallicum Rhenum horribile aequor ulti- mosque Britannos,	10
omnia haec, quaecumque feret voluntas caelitum, temptare simul parati, pauca nuntiate meae puellae non bona dicta:	15
cum suis vivat valeatque moechis, quos simul complexa tenet trecentos, nullum amans vere, sed identidem omnium ilia rumpens;	20
nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem, qui illius culpa cecidit velut prati ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam tactus aratro est.	

Furius and Aurelius, friends of Catullus, whether he'll penetrate farthest Indus, where the shore is buffeted by the far-resounding Eastern wave, or to the Hyrcanians or soft Arabians, or the Sacae or arrow-bearing Parthians, or the plains which the seven-mouthed Nile tinges, or whether he'll tramp across the tall Alps, going to see the monuments of great Caesar, the Gallic Rhine, the horrible waters, the Britons, most remote, friends prepared to undergo all these things with me, whatever the celestial will may bring, take a little message to my girl, not a good one: May she live and prosper with her adulterers, three hundred of whom she holds together in her embrace, not really loving any, but again and again bursting the groins of all into pieces; and she must not count on my love, as before she could, which by her fault has fallen like a flower at the meadow's edge, after it's been touched by the passing plough.

The progression of the poem follows Catullus as he moves from a powerful, confident Roman man, conquering in a very sexual manner (*penetrabit*) various Roman provinces, to a virgin bride on her wedding night, as the imagery of the *prati ultimi flos* ("the flower at the meadow's edge") suggests. By placing this poem in Sapphic strophe, Catullus evokes Sappho's voice and poetic tradition in order to contextualize his poem within a setting primed for reversal. Catullus' progress from "assured explorer of geography's known bounds" to a "fallen flower" is foreshadowed in the very meter, as Sappho herself frequently transgresses boundaries of male and female.<sup>35</sup>

The shift between genders begins in the third stanza with the use of *gradietur* in lieu of repeating *penetrabit*. *Gradior*, a significantly milder and less suggestive word choice as well as a deponent verb, which more closely aligns it with passivity, lacks the sexual connotation of *penetro* and signifies the beginning of a shift from a masculine to feminine voice. Furthermore, the arrival of Caesar in the third stanza signifies a drastic weakening of Catullus' masculine identity, as he is no longer the sole audacious adventurer but rather plays second fiddle to the *Caesaris...monimenta magni* ("monuments of great Caesar"). In the fourth stanza, Catullus ends

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<sup>35</sup> Michael C. J. Putnam, "Catullus 11: The Ironies of Integrity," in *Catullus*, ed. Julia Haig Gaisser (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91.

his geographical description and again addresses Furius and Aurelius, but with disproportionate expectations. Catullus' *comites* are *omnia haec...temptare simul parati* ("prepared to attempt all these things at once"), but instead of making a grandiose request befitting this description, Catullus merely asks for a "little message" (*pauca nuntiate*). The litotes in line 16 (*non bona*) further emphasizes the poet's unbalanced request, understating the full weight of the message he wishes to send to Lesbia.

This progression emphasizes the tension Lesbia brings to Catullus' construction of gender within his poetry and within Roman civic and personal identity spheres. At the opening of the poem, Catullus is preoccupied with a life of *virtus*, which Ernst Fredricksmeyer describes as "devoted to strenuous exertions with his male companions in a spirit of friendship, patriotism, and religious respect."<sup>36</sup> Fredricksmeyer argues that the poem represents a radical shift in Catullus' identity, that "while Lesbia, his '*puella*,' had been Catullus' friend, she is now his enemy, and while Furius and Aurelius had been his enemies, they are now his friends. With this reversal of relationships, Catullus has turned around his life."<sup>37</sup> Fredricksmeyer reads the progression of *carmen* 11 as a repudiation of Catullus' former life of private passion, associated with feminine indulgence. Now that Lesbia has left him, Catullus instead embraces the masculine world of action and adventure, travelling around the world with his companions.

However, I believe that *carmen* 11 resists such a smooth transition from one gender sphere to the other, and instead closely intertwines Catullus' masculine adventures and conquests of empire with Lesbia's sexual conquests, confusing *virtus* with *eros*. As Ellen Greene argues:

It is only when we see how rapacious imperialism and unbounded sexual desire are inextricably linked that we are able to see that the speaker's repugnance toward Lesbia also implies a dismissal of the traditional Roman values embodied

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<sup>36</sup> Ernst Fredricksmeyer, "Method and Interpretation: Catullus 11," *Helios* 20 (1993): 94.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

in the manly exploits of both Caesar and the speaker's "devoted," "faithful" companions.<sup>38</sup>

Rather than turning away from Lesbia and feminine desire and embracing masculinity and his "friends" Furius and Aurelius, Catullus never entirely occupies a single gender sphere, sometimes acting within a masculine context but at other times voicing strictly feminine concepts such as the virginal bride on her wedding night (22-23). Even Catullus' strongly masculine expressions at the opening of the poem slightly remove him from that context. He begins the poem by referring to himself in the third person (*comites Catulli*), one of his "characteristic traits for demonstrating self-division," immediately distancing himself from the masculine agent who *in extremos penetrabit Indos* ("will penetrate farthest Indus").<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, while he is penetrating the geographical areas he explores, placing him in the masculine and active role, by associating himself with far-off places such as the Indus River (2), Hyrcania and Arabia (5), Egypt (8), and Britain (12), Catullus further removes himself from the Roman ideal, in effect "otherizing" and feminizing himself. At the same time, however, the speaker also turns away from pieces of his personal life, scorning Lesbia and adulteries (17-20).

Catullus' use of his *comites*, which often refer to military comrades and is therefore strongly rooted in male relationships, to send messages to his mistress (*pauca nuntiate meae puellae*, 15) also complicates the boundaries between masculine and feminine as the poet introduces norms from one gender sphere into another. In examining the tension in *carmen* 11 between Catullus' commitment to both Sapphic and Roman ideals and his struggle to maintain a sense of masculine power amidst his feelings of erotic desire, Greene observes that:

[Catullus'] transformation of Lesbia into an entity as awe-inducing as one of Caesar's monuments depersonalizes her, and thus objectifies her in much the

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<sup>38</sup> Ellen Greene, "Gendered Domains: Public and Private in Catullus," in *The Erotics of Domination: Male Desire and the Mistress in Latin Love Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 27.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

same way as she herself dehumanizes her nameless lovers. Thus, one can argue that Catullus' verbal abuse of Lesbia reinforces his identification with conventional masculine, and here misogynistic, attitudes. Yet, through his retreat into poetic images and his devaluation of the excesses of conquest and domination, he shows an alienation from male culture. That alienation is reinforced in the poem's final images of Lesbia as a cold, utilitarian plow and Catullus as a fragile flower crushed by what seems like an inhuman killing machine. This concluding image of Catullus certainly seems to emphasize his identification with feminine sexuality and vulnerability.<sup>40</sup>

The conflicting associations in the poem between masculine and feminine traits obscure Catullus' identity, as he constantly switches between the two spheres. His alignment with traditional masculine attitudes at the beginning of the poem, as Greene mentions, sharply contradicts the later image in the final stanza of Catullus as the virginal flower being plowed down by merciless Lesbia.

As Sappho also transgresses traditional conceptions of gender roles, it is fitting that Catullus invoke her in both *carmina* 11 and 51, the only two poems in the corpus written in Sapphic strophe, which serve as bookends for his relationship with Lesbia. *Carmen* 51 is generally read as the beginning of their relationship while *carmen* 11 is considered the final poem in the Lesbia cycle, the very end of the relationship, as Catullus is finally able to renounce Lesbia.<sup>41</sup> While the allusions to Sappho in *carmen* 51 establish the unsurpassable beauty and wit of Catullus' beloved, however, the poet's invocation of Sappho again in the final stanza of *carmen* 11 has the opposite effect. The final stanza of *carmen* 11 has potential parallels to Sappho's fragment 105c, which is thought to describe a young girl as a flower trampled by shepherds:

οἶαν τὰν ὑάκινθον ἐν ὄρεσι  
 ποιμένες ἄνδρες  
 πόσσι καταστειβοῖσι, χάμαι δὲ

<sup>40</sup> Ellen Greene, "Catullus and Sappho," in *A Companion to Catullus*, ed. Marilyn B. Skinner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007a), 144.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Wiseman (1985) and Dettmer (1997).

τὸ πόρφυρον ἄνθος...

Like a hyacinth in the mountains that the shepherd men trample with their feet,  
and its purple flower falling to the ground...<sup>42</sup>

Catullus deliberately places himself in the feminine position by describing himself similarly to the purple hyacinth flower of Sappho's fragment. Furthermore, Lesbia is positioned as the masculine plow, paralleling the destructive shepherds of Sappho (clearly marked as male with the masculine ἄνδρες). Quite opposite from the beautiful feminine figure of 51, the Lesbia of *carmen* 11 is relegated to the masculine sphere, associated with utilitarianism and mundane labor. Just as the shepherds are "heedless of the beauty of their surroundings," destroying a flower as they go about their work, Lesbia plows down fragile Catullus, oblivious to his suffering.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, Lesbia's interaction with her adulterers portrays her as cheap, interested "only in the physical, in sex as conquest and commerce," further delineating her from the feminine sphere.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, it is Catullus who occupies the feminine sphere in this final stanza, as flowers in Sappho are often associated with female innocence.<sup>45</sup>

Catullus' degradation of Lesbia and the description of her destructive masculine nature at the end of the poem emphasize the reversal of traditional gender roles, as Catullus is no longer in a dominant position. By the end of the poem, Lesbia holds all the power, and is so intimidating Catullus must send others to deliver his message for him. Rather than having the autonomy and personal agency to curse Lesbia himself, Catullus is left with merely *pauca...non bona* ("a few not-good words"). And it is not only Catullus whom she has in her grasp, but three-hundred other *moechi* as well. The word *moechus*, a direct borrowing from the Greek μοιχός, carried with it at

<sup>42</sup> Trans. Greene (2007). The Greek text is also taken from Greene.

<sup>43</sup> Greene, "Catullus and Sappho," 145.

<sup>44</sup> Putnam, *Catullus 11: The Ironies of Integrity*, 93. See lines 17-20 for Lesbia's use of sex as conquest.

<sup>45</sup> See Greene, "Catullus and Sappho," 145-6, and Stehle Stigers, "Retreat from the Male," 82-102. Also see Sappho frag. 21, 30, 81, 94, 96, 103, 105c, 122, and 132.

this time a specialized meaning of “corrupter of married women.”<sup>46</sup> The legal and societal repercussions of being a *moechus* connect the personal, sexual relationship to Catullus’ male civic reputation in this poem, contributing to the overall tone of the poem and once again transgressing boundaries of Roman standards of masculine and feminine. Although Lesbia possesses a masculine dominance in their relationship, Catullus’ message to her slurs her reputation and establishes her as unworthy of his attention, partially correcting this gendered imbalance and returning a modicum of authority to Catullus.

However, the imagery in the final stanza heavily feminizes Catullus, complicating this reading of the poem. In the final stanza, Catullus is reduced to a virginal bride, *prati ultimi flos* (“a flower at the meadow’s edge”), not because their relationship was unconsummated or lacked passion, but because he views his position in their dynamic as innocent, abstracted from reality, and, unfortunately, vulnerable. Lesbia is able to harm Catullus no matter how distant he is, as evinced from *ultimi*, which echoes the *ultimos Britannos* of the second stanza when Catullus is still in full possession of his masculine identity. Furthermore, Lesbia’s power is so great that a mere touch (*tactus*) is enough to completely destroy the flower.<sup>47</sup> The overtones of marriage and loss of virginal innocence the word *flos* suggests also allude to Sappho, whose corpus includes a number of epithalamia. The invocation of a wedding song here, however, is not the beginning of a new stage of life as in Sappho’s poetry but the end of one. The disparity between Catullus’ wedding song in these stanzas and those of Sappho further solidifies the end of his relationship with Lesbia and Lesbia’s broken connection to Sappho.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> As *adulter* was not specialized at this time to connote a legal term, *moechus* was used during Late Republican Rome to specify the act of seducing a married woman. For a detailed discussion of the early uses of *moechus/a*, see J.N. Adams, “Words for ‘Prostitute’ in Latin,” *Rheinisches Museum Für Philologie* 126 (1983): 351-3.

<sup>47</sup> See Garrison (2012) and Quinn (1973).

<sup>48</sup> For more on Catullus’ wedding hymns and flower imagery, see Vassiliki Panoussi, “Sexuality and Ritual: Catullus’ Wedding Poems,” in *A Companion to Catullus*, ed. Marilyn B. Skinner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007a), 276-292.

*Carmen 76*

While Catullus' poetry departs from traditional Roman values in many places, as is characteristic of the Neoterics, and his poetry has very feminine imagery, other poems nevertheless illustrate grounding in a traditional background. This tension between traditional and radical in his poetry, *pietas* and *dignitas* versus *eros* and *amor*, parallels the tension between masculine and feminine. The following poem provides a useful description of these traditional Roman concepts which Catullus respects and values, but also occasionally departs from in poetry describing his relationship with Lesbia, and specifically in his use of Greek poetic traditions. In the poem, Catullus invokes the gods to cure him of the misery Lesbia has caused him in ending their relationship, citing his masculine *pietas*, or piety and moral uprightness not only towards the gods but also in matters of the state, as a reason for their intervention.<sup>49</sup> The invocation of the gods on account of a masculine concept such as *pietas* for help in a personal matter of *eros* once again transgresses the closely guarded divisions between Roman gender positions as Catullus introduces masculine civic values into his personal relationships.<sup>50</sup> The poem begins with an explanation of the duties required for a man to be *pius*, and then transitions to Catullus beseeching the gods to cure him of the misery Lesbia has caused him on account of this *pietas* that Catullus claims he has.

Siqua recordanti benefacta priora voluptas  
 est homini, cum se cogitat esse pium,  
 nec sanctam violasse fidem, nec foedere nullo  
 divum ad fallendos numine abusum homines,  
 multa parata manent in longa aetate, Catulle,  
 ex hoc ingrato gaudia amore tibi.

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<sup>49</sup> *Pietas* could be a masculine or feminine virtue in relation to one's family or the gods, but by masculine *pietas* here I specifically mean in relation to political matters. See Donald C. Earl, *The Moral and Political Tradition of Rome* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 20-22.

<sup>50</sup> For *pietas* as a masculine concept, see R. M. Henry, "'Pietas' and 'Fides' in Catullus," *Hermathena* 75 (1950): 63-68. See also Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas is frequently referred to as *pius* in order to emphasize his masculine excellence.

Nam quaecumque homines bene cuiquam aut dicere possunt  
 aut facere, haec a te dictaque factaque sunt.  
 Omnia quae ingratae perierunt credita menti.  
 Quare iam te cur amplius excrucies? 10  
 Quin tu animo offirmas atque istinc te ipse reducis,  
 et dis invitis desinis esse miser?  
 Difficile est longum subito deponere amorem,  
 difficile est, verum hoc qua lubet efficias:  
 una salus haec est, hoc est tibi pervincendum,  
 hoc facias, sive id non pote sive pote. 15  
 O di, si vestrum est misereri, aut si quibus umquam  
 extremam iam ipsa in morte tulistis opem,  
 me miserum aspicate et, si vitam puriter egi,  
 eripite hanc pestem perniciemque mihi! 20  
 hei mihi subrepens imos ut torpor in artus  
 expulit ex omni pectore laetitas.  
 Non iam illud quaero, contra me ut diligat illa,  
 aut, quod non potis est, esse pudica velit:  
 ipse valere opto et taetrum hunc deponere morbum. 25  
 O di, reddite mi hoc pro pietate mea.

If there is any pleasure in recalling a man's good deeds from the past, when he thinks that he is pious, and has not violated a sacred trust, nor in any contract abused the power of the gods to deceive men, there remains much joy for you, Catullus, in this long life, prepared from this thankless love. For whatever men can say or do well for anyone, this has been said and done by you: but all this perished, entrusted to an ungrateful soul. Therefore, why now do you suffer more? Why not hold fast in your mind and bring yourself back from there, and cease to be miserable, since the gods are unwilling? It is difficult suddenly to set aside a long love, it is difficult, this is true, no matter how you do it. This is the only safety, and this must be overcome; you must do this, whether it is possible or impossible. O gods, if it is in you to have compassion, or if you have ever already brought to anyone final aid in death itself, look upon miserable me, and, if I have led life correctly, snatch away from me this plague and ruin! Alas, like a numbness creeping under my limbs it snatched away the happiness from my entire breast. I no longer ask for that, that she love me in return, or, because that is not possible, that she choose to be chaste: I wish to be healthy myself and to cast aside this foul disease. O gods, grant me this on account of my piety.

This poem contains several parallels with Catullus' translation of Sappho, although the messages they contain are strikingly different. While *carmen* 51 marks the beginning of the Lesbia cycle, *carmen* 76 represents a later part in their relationship, after Lesbia has left Catullus but he is still passionate about her. The *torpor in artus* in line 21 reminds us of the paralysis Catullus felt upon

first seeing Lesbia (51.9), but here it is the symptom of a disease (*pestem perniciemque*, “plague and destruction;” *morbum*, “disease”). The traditional Roman virtues here in his prayer to the gods to alleviate his suffering signify a shift in the poet’s relationship with Lesbia. The wild abandon and ecstasy of *carmen* 51, in which Catullus was entirely overtaken by passion for Lesbia, has been replaced with a staunch observance of *pietas* and *fides*.

However, even Catullus’ very Roman observance of *pietas* represents the tension between masculine and feminine in Catullus’ poetry. In *carmen* 51, the tone (save for the final stanza) is one of passion and *eros*, as Catullus loses control of himself and his *ratio* and allows his passion for Lesbia to take over. This excessive display of emotion characterizes Catullus’ response in the poem as feminine, as he is no longer in control or the dominant figure in the relationship. Rather, Lesbia has the power to dictate his actions. After Lesbia has spurned him, however, the Catullus in *carmen* 76 returns to his masculine duties, describing his *pietas* and begging the gods to bring him out of his miserable state on account of it. The first few lines give a description of the *pius* man, using the legal terms *fides* and *foedus*, that “[f]irst and foremost he must be a man of honour [*sic*], a man of his word; secondly, he must never speak of, nor act towards, others with unkindness or want of consideration.”<sup>51</sup>

The good character of a Roman man is described in relation to other men, to be honorable and faithful in his contracts and obligations with them, and now that Catullus’ personal relationship with Lesbia, a woman, has failed, he turns to the masculine sphere for salvation from his misery. Catullus even mentions that he has entrusted his faith to an ungrateful soul (*ingratae menti*), whom we can assume to be Lesbia, but it was wasted (*perierunt*). This admission of introducing a woman into traditionally masculine relationships defined by sacred trusts

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 65.

(*sanctum...fidem*) and contracts (*foedere*) further proves Catullus' relationship with Lesbia defied traditional norms of gender, even though these trusts were eventually broken.

However, this invocation of *pietas* and civic duty in order to find solace from his lost love only complicates the poem. As in *carmen* 11, Catullus is not merely turning away from *eros* and embracing masculine norms; he is instead using *pietas* as a tool to solve his problems with Lesbia, problems concerning *amor* and *cupido*. The speaker even grants that, while he and his *puella* were together, he treated her not merely as a mistress or object of *eros*, but as an equal partner, including her in his typically male interactions (*Nam quaecumque homines bene cuiquam aut dicere possunt aut facere, haec a te dictaque factaque sunt. Omnia quae ingratae perierunt credita menti, 7-9*).<sup>52</sup> The good deeds that encompass *pietas* were executed by the speaker but wasted on the *ingratae menti* of his lover, a personal romantic relationship. Even though the relationship has ended, however, traditional Roman gender boundaries are still being transgressed, as the speaker calls on the gods to cure him of his misery (caused by feminine *eros*) on account of his masculine *pietas* (25-26). The transgressive nature of his relationship with Lesbia does not end along with the relationship, but instead persists in complicating gender boundaries.

Elsewhere, Catullus also describes his adulterous affair with Lesbia in terms of a legitimate marriage.<sup>53</sup> He often calls upon an honor code between gentlemen when beseeching Lesbia to remain with him, “desexualiz[ing] the liaison [and] converting it into a contractual bond (*foedus*) between gentlemen.”<sup>54</sup> The *pietas* which Catullus references in *carmen* 76 is an account of the actions he has taken in his relationship with Lesbia, not with other male equals,

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<sup>52</sup> “For whatever men can say or do well for anyone, this has been said and done by you: but all this perished, entrusted to an ungrateful soul.”

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, 68.143-8, in which Catullus describes Lesbia's visit to his house as a bride crossing the threshold of her new husband's house on their wedding day. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 221.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

and in *carmen* 72 he describes his relationship to her as one between two male relatives: *dilexisti te non tantum ut vulgus amicam, sed pater ut gnatos diligit et generos* (“Then I loved you not only as a common person loves his girlfriend, but as a father loves his sons and sons-in-law.”)<sup>55</sup> The portrayal of their relationship as not only a lawful marriage between man and woman but also as the bond between a father and his sons creates a false sense of legitimacy for Catullus’ relationship with Lesbia, and elsewhere he even elevates Lesbia above himself in sexual and emotional dominance.<sup>56</sup> As Marilyn Skinner writes:

By forging ties of intimate friendship, *amicitia*,<sup>57</sup> with his mistress, [Catullus] had attempted to define a private sphere of relations grounded upon a steadfastness banished from the larger political realm with its self-serving friendships (*amicitiae*) and flimsy alliances for convenience. Yet his claim to virtue as a lover, and his righteous anger at her perfidy, were of course already undercut by his disregard for the inviolability of marriage, an institution even more fundamental to an ordered community than friendship.<sup>58</sup>

Lesbia’s status in relation to Catullus becomes increasingly elevated as he seeks to lay claim to legal connections and foundations for their relationship, but ultimately his construction of their relationship is an artificial one, built on terms that do not have function or meaning within a personal, adulterous relationship. While his attempts to bolster their failing relationship by couching it in masculine terms and concepts are not successful, probably due to the disregard for the sanctity of marriage which Skinner mentions or the synthetic blending of concepts traditionally limited to civic or masculine relationships into a personal romantic relationship, Catullus’ elevation of Lesbia nevertheless conflates traditional Roman gender spheres. In his fervor to retain this relationship, Catullus disregards social expectations for gender roles and

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<sup>55</sup> Cat. 72.3-4.

<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, the final stanza of *carmen* 11.

<sup>57</sup> Although Catullus does not specifically use the term *amicitia* in 76 when referring to Lesbia.

<sup>58</sup> Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 220.

transgresses the boundaries between Roman concepts of masculine and feminine spheres and relationships.

Overall, the private relationships in Catullus' poetry, specifically with Lesbia, tend to be accompanied by feminine imagery and voice, such as the loss of *ratio* and excess passion of *carmen* 51. Conversely, when Catullus uses a more masculine tone, counterbalancing his feminine expressions, he often refers to civic values traditionally limited to men, such as *pietas*, *fides*, or *otium*. However, this itself is a problem, as Catullus' invocations for the civic concept of *pietas* in his personal relationship blur gender lines. Alternatively, as the following section will examine, other poems in the Catullan corpus use highly aggressive and obscene imagery to express a masculine tone, occasionally introducing feminine imagery and concepts into his masculine persona instead of the reverse that has been described in this section.

## Section IV: Catullus as Man

### *Hypermasculinity and the Invective*

While Catullus' feminine voice is prevalent throughout his poetry, the Catullan corpus is also infamous for its vicious invectives, characterized by (often violent) sexual aggression and hypermasculinity. The invectives exemplify the Roman ideals of masculinity and the concept of masculinity as an achieved state which can therefore be lost through excessive feminine behavior.<sup>59</sup> Because of this, there existed among Roman men a certain amount of anxiety of becoming feminine and losing their masculinity. In Catullus' poetry, this anxiety is illustrated by "less focus on 'being a good man' than on 'being good at being a man.'"<sup>60</sup> Catullus' invectives in particular serve to correct the imbalance of feminine to masculine voice in his poetry by restoring dominance, usually sexual, to himself and establishing supremacy over the subject of his invective. However, as this section will show, the "corrections" in these invectives are not always successful at reestablishing the masculinity authority of the speaker.

#### *Carmen 16*

Catullus' most famous invective, directed at his "friends" Furius and Aurelius, serves as a prime example of this gender correction. Furius and Aurelius have accused Catullus of being effeminate (*mollis*) because his poetry is concerned with feminine concepts such as *eros* and *amor*. Catullus responds with a highly aggressive and sexually charged threat, reminding the two of his masculinity and reestablishing his authority over them through asserting sexual dominance.

Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo,  
Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi,  
qui me ex versiculis meis putastis,

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<sup>59</sup> See Skinner (2005).

<sup>60</sup> David Wray, *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 67.



accuses Furius and Aurelius of femininity, calling them *pathicus* and *cinaedus*, words that do not have a precise English meaning but are both pejorative terms marking a man as sexually submissive and effeminate. Additionally, these words are transliterations of originally Greek terms, which further associates the terms with excess femininity and non-Roman values. This role-reversal flips Furius and Aurelius' accusations around, marking Catullus as the aggressor and his attackers as victims.

However, the poem's message is complicated by Catullus' claim that the poet is a separate entity from the voice in his poetry: *nam castum esse decet pium poetam ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est* ("For it's proper for a dutiful poet to be chaste himself, but it's not necessary for his poems.") In a prime example of *apologia*, defined by Amy Richlin as a poetic disclaimer "that, however obscene [or effeminate] the subject matter of the work at hand, the author himself had sound morals," Catullus distances himself from the poetic *ego* in his poetry, which is often improperly obscene or effeminate.<sup>63</sup> These disclaimers were important in preserving the reputation of the poet, as the content of Catullus' work, obscene, effeminate, and highly sexual, would have been considered inappropriate within certain circles. Just as modern conceptions of obscenity limit its usage, obscenity in Roman culture:

...included the restriction of certain words from certain situations and the association of ideas of staining with sexuality. This makes even more surprising the position of the *vates* of obscenity, the poets who took as their area the garden of Priapus. Were they really secure in their place? Were they not stained by the content of their work?<sup>64</sup>

Catullus' disclaimer separates the poet from his poetry, allowing him to maintain his masculine standing while writing material that would otherwise have been inappropriate for a person of his status to circulate. In doing so, Catullus redraws the line between civic reputation and individual

<sup>63</sup> Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 2.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

pursuits, redefining the propriety of his work and establishing firm boundaries between his poetry and reality. How then are we to take the threat leveled at Furius and Aurelius? If Catullus' effeminate overtures in his other poetry, particularly *carmen* 48, which is specifically alluded to in this poem (*vos, quod milia multa basiorum legistis*),<sup>65</sup> are not illustrative of his true character, it follows also that the hypermasculine persona demonstrated in *carmen* 16 cannot be attributed to Catullus himself. Rather, we should take Catullus' threat as a further dismissal of Furius and Aurelius' claims. Far from being soft, Catullus' poetry is still "as stimulating as sexually explicit descriptions" (lines 7-11), at least for those who are sophisticated enough to understand it.<sup>66</sup> As T.P. Wiseman argues, the very obscenity of the first line of *carmen* 16 "betrays the underlying conflict of attitudes; only thus could Catullus get his message through to sensibilities so much cruder than his own."<sup>67</sup>

This brings into question the Roman societal gender norms to which Catullus' poetry conforms (or from which it departs). While this invective uses hypermasculinity and sexual aggression to reestablish the poet's masculine persona, it also challenges Furius and Aurelius' limited conceptions of what poetry (and eroticism) is or should be. Catullus' poetry, and this poem in particular, seems to suggest that the traditional paradigms of masculinity as Furius and Aurelius view them are not all there is to "being good at being a man." Catullus' poem is a defense of the finer things in life, the more sophisticated pleasures in which a man might indulge himself than base sexuality and brute force. Instead of viewing poetry about *eros* and *cupido* as a mark of effeminacy, as Furius and Aurelius claim (*me ex versiculis meis putastis, quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum*, "You think that, because my verses are effeminate, I'm not quite decent," 3-4), Catullus argues that it is this very softness or indecency that makes the poem

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<sup>65</sup> See *carmen* 48.

<sup>66</sup> Wiseman, *Catullus and His World: A Reappraisal*, 123-4.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

clever and charming (*tum denique habent salem ac leporem, si sunt molliculi ac parum pudici*, “In fact, then, these have wit and charm, if they are a bit effeminate and not quite decent,” 7-8).

Catullus also reasserts his masculinity through his subject, or the person his poetry addresses. While many of Catullus’ poems maintain a feminine voice and are directed to his mistress Lesbia, the greater part of the Catullan corpus is primarily concerned not with interactions between the poet and his female lover but instead on the social interactions between elite Roman males, or homosocial patterns. Setting aside the Lesbia poems, many of Catullus’ poems are focused on masculine excellence, specifically in comparison with other elite Roman men. We have already seen Catullus’ re-appropriation of Sappho 31 from a poem primarily concerned with the response to the desired person to one that is mostly focused on the other male rival and ways in which the response is inappropriate. This pattern of focus on other men in the same social category as Catullus continues throughout the corpus, even in several of the Lesbia poems. In the thirty-seven poems following *carmen* 11, none are addressed to Lesbia, and her name appears only once. Twenty-nine of these are, however, addressed to, or take as a subject, a man or pair of men.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, other poems outside of the Lesbia cycle that do not specifically refer to homosocial actions can still be helpful in teasing out Catullus’ anxieties concerning the ease with which an individual might lose his masculine status, as we shall see in the following poem.

### *Carmen* 63

Catullus’ poetry is highly concerned with homosocial behavior and the poet’s place in society as well as his relationship with Greek poetry, perhaps even more so than it is concerned with Lesbia. Take, for instance, Catullus’ version of the myth of Attis and Cybele. This poem

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<sup>68</sup> See Wray, *The Poetics of Roman Manhood*, 70.

tells the story of Attis, an *ephebe* on the cusp of manhood who, swept up in the fervor of Cybele's cult, castrates himself, making him, in effect, a woman. Later, Attis comes to regret his (or her, as the poem refers to Attis in the feminine gender after the castration) rash decision. Attis refuses to transition from *ephebe* to adult, instead becoming something in-between the two. As a woman, Attis retains his passive sexual nature but also can no longer be considered a child. Through this aborted transition, the roles of child and adult are twisted together, once again questioning gender and social boundaries and exemplifying the potential danger a Roman man faced of losing his masculine status and reverting back to a feminine state. However, Attis' regret suggests that this transition, as much as it was feared, is now an impossible one and the only alternative, which Attis has chosen through the act of castrating himself, is an unnatural warping of traditional roles and customs.

In this section from the poem, Attis has just awoken from a deep sleep after a night of revelry and wild abandon, and begins to regret his decision to castrate himself and devote his life to following Cybele. Attis' regret exemplifies the danger men faced of losing their masculine standing and the ramifications even a single rash decision or action could have on one's social standing. Although Attis loses his masculine standing in the poem, he is still primarily concerned with homosocial interactions, albeit those he has lost the ability to have rather than those he is actively engaged in.

egone a mea remota haec ferar in nemora domo?  
 patria, bonis, amicis, genitoribus abero?  
 abero foro, palaestra, stadio et gymnasiis? 60  
 miser a miser, querendum est etiam atque etiam, anime.  
 quod enim genus figuraest, ego non quod obierim?  
 ego mulier, ego adulescens, ego ephebus, ego puer,  
 ego gymnasi fui flos, ego eram decus olei:  
 mihi ianuae frequentes, mihi limina tepida, 65  
 mihi floridis corollis redimita domus erat,  
 linquendum ubi esset orto mihi Sole cubiculum.

ego nunc deum ministra et Cybeles famula ferar?  
 ego Maenas, ego mei pars, ego vir sterilis ero?  
 ego viridis algida Idae nive amicta loca colam? 70  
 ego vitam agam sub altis Phrygiae columinibus,  
 ubi cerva silvicultrix, ubi aper nemorivagus?  
 iam iam dolet quod egi, iam iamque paenitet.

Have I been carried from my distant home to this grove? Shall I be absent from homeland, possessions, friends, and family? Shall I be absent from the forum, palaestra, stadium, and gymnasium? Sorrow from sorrow, it must be lamented again and again, o my soul. For what kind of form is there, which I have not taken on? I a woman, I an adolescent, a youth, a boy, I was the flower of the gymnasium, I was the glory of the wrestling ring: my doors were crowded, my thresholds were warm, my house was wreathed with garlands of flowers, whenever I had to leave my bedroom with the sunrise. Shall I now be declared servant of the gods and handmaiden of Cybele? Shall I be a Maenad, a part of myself, a sterile man? Shall I inhabit the places of green Ida covered in icy snow? Shall I spend life under the tall peaks of Phrygia, where the deer dwells in the woodland, where the boar wanders the forest? Now, now I am sorry for what I have done, and now, now I regret it.

Attis regrets his decision because he misses the benefits he received when he was an *epebe*, but his castration also means a loss of the societal status that he would have enjoyed as an adult male. He laments that he now must live away from his homeland and all the comforts of friends and family (58-62). Before his castration, Attis was “the conventional *pais kalos* (‘beautiful boy’),” and would have received much attention from older admirers (*mihi ianuae frequentes, mihi limina tepida, mihi floridis corollis redimita domus erat*, “my doors were crowded, my thresholds were warm, my house was wreathed with garlands of flowers”).<sup>69</sup> However, when the time came for him to transition out of this phase of his life into full adulthood, Attis was unable to “make the transition society demanded from the role of *puer delicatus* to that of husband.”<sup>70</sup> The attention he received as a young man went to his head, and, unable to relinquish the glory of his youth, Attis instead chose to make his position permanent, to remain a “passive object of

<sup>69</sup> Skinner, “*Ego mulier*: The Construction of Male Sexuality in Catullus,” 458.

<sup>70</sup> Kenneth Quinn, *Catullus: An Interpretation* (London: Batsford, 1972), 249-51.

admiration.”<sup>71</sup> We can see this narcissism especially in Attis’ own description of himself: *ego gymnasi fui flos, ego eram decus olei*, “I was the flower of the gymnasium, I was the glory of the wrestling ring” (64). However, by avoiding the transition from youth to man, Attis must give up his position in society, as his situation is not normal nor is it condoned by his culture. Once Attis realizes the full consequences of his actions, he regrets them (*iam iam dolet quod egi, iam iamque paenitet*, “Now, now I am sorry for what I have done, and now, now I regret it”) (73).

Although the poem concerns a Greek youth rather than a Roman one, a fact which would have further influenced the opinions of Catullus’ Roman audience on Attis’ sexuality, there are still many parallels between the Attis story and the Roman homosocial themes found in Catullus’ other *carmina*. The preoccupation with the issue of an aborted transition from boy to man, or a regression from man to woman, continues throughout his poetry, and many of Catullus’ invectives and displays of hypermasculinity serve as a separation from the more categorically feminine component of his voice as Catullus struggles with the implications of writing Greek-influenced erotic poetry. Catullus’ use of obscenity and Priapic threats, normally socially inappropriate, serves to restore his sexual dominance by asserting his superiority over the subject of his invective and to distance himself from potential repercussions such as Attis experienced. As Amy Richlin points out, “to expose victims as sexually abnormal – men as pathic homosexuals, women as promiscuous – is to imply sexual power over them, to threaten them as Priapus threatens thieves.”<sup>72</sup>

### *Carmen 37*

Just as *carmen 16* shifts the focus off of Catullus’ effeminate poetry and onto Furius and Aurelius’ passive sexualities (*pathice et cinaede*) and *carmen 63* discusses the potential

<sup>71</sup> Skinner, “*Ego mulier*: The Construction of Male Sexuality in Catullus,” 460.

<sup>72</sup> Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, 63.

repercussions a loss of masculinity might bring, other poems within the Catullan corpus also serve as witnesses to Catullus' masculinity and his attempts to maintain this status and avoid a fate similar to Attis. *Carmen 37* claims that Catullus will “facefuck all two hundred” of the men sitting in a bar (*non putatis ausurum me una ducentos irrumare sessores?*), an overly exaggerated threat that functions more figuratively than literally in order to prove his masculinity. Many of Catullus' invectives are directed at other Roman men within his own social circle who have in some way accused Catullus of having a feminine nature because of the erotic, “soft” subjects of his poetry. Ultimately, Catullus' primary concern is with his civic or masculine image and how other men view him rather than with a woman's opinion, even one as important as Lesbia. In addition to its ridiculous threats *irrumare*, poem 37 is almost entirely concerned with Catullus' relationship with other men, barely mentioning Lesbia at all.

Salax taberna vosque contubernales,  
 a pilleatis nona fratribus pila,  
 solis putatis esse mentulas vobis,  
 solis licere, quidquid est puellarum,  
 confutuere et putare ceteros hircos? 5  
 an, continenter quod sedetis insulsi  
 centum an ducenti, non putatis ausurum  
 me una ducentos irrumare sessores?  
 atqui putate: namque totius vobis  
 frontem tabernae sopionibus scribam. 10  
 puella nam mi, quae meo sinu fugit,  
 amata tantum quantum amabitur nulla,  
 pro qua mihi sunt magna bella pugnata,  
 consedit istic. hanc boni beatique  
 omnes amatis, et quidem, quod indignum est, 15  
 omnes pusilli et semitarii moechi;  
 tu praeter omnes une de capillatis,  
 cuniculosae Celtiberiae fili,  
 Egnati, opaca quem bonum facit barba  
 et dens Hibera defricatus urina. 20

O lustful bar and you, its barflies, the ninth pillar from the cap-clad brothers, do you think that you alone have pricks, that you alone are allowed to fuck whatever girls there are, and say the other men are billygoats? Or, because one or two

hundred of you idiots are sitting in a row, do you think I won't dare to facefuck all two hundred in your seats? Think again: I will paint all the front of your bar with dicks. For my girl, who ran away from my lap, loved so much as no girl will be loved, for whose sake I fought great battles, sits there. You are all loving her, happy and fine, and indeed – what is intolerable – you're all puny streetscum and adulterous fuckers; above all you, Egnatius, one of the hairy ones, spawn of rabbit-ridden Celtiberia, with a bushy beard that makes you fine and teeth rubbed with Spanish piss.

Although this poem is part of the Lesbia cycle, she is not even mentioned by name, and does not make an appearance until half-way through the poem, where she is merely called *puella* (11). Rather than Lesbia taking the focus as subject in this poem, it is the barflies who lust after her with whom Catullus appears mainly concerned, and he begins the poem by addressing the entire tavern and its customers (*Salax taberna vosque contubernales*) before eventually zeroing in on the one rival he considers worst of all, Egnatius.<sup>73</sup> In fact, Christopher Nappa has argued that Lesbia is entirely secondary to the men in the bar; she serves merely as a contact point between Catullus and the barflies, to create a rivalry: “the poet mentions her neither at the beginning nor the end; even in the lines which do involve her, the poet consistently focuses on the men around her rather than on the woman herself.”<sup>74</sup>

Lesbia is still, however, a significant factor in this poem and in the construction of Catullus' masculinity, even though she is barely mentioned. The main reason for Catullus' aggression against the barflies is Lesbia's presence there, signaled by the *nam* in line 11: *puella nam mi, quae meo sinu fugit* (“for my girl, who ran away from my lap”). Catullus' mistress has left him, placing his masculine status in jeopardy, and in order for Catullus to reestablish his superior position he must overcompensate through a crude and sexually aggressive invective aimed at the men who might think themselves his better now that Lesbia is with them. In other

<sup>73</sup> Egnatius is also lampooned in *carmen* 39, with the same charge of using urine to clean his teeth, but without any mention of a *puella*.

<sup>74</sup> Christopher Nappa, *Aspects of Catullus' Social Fiction* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 2001), 62.

words, Catullus “feels that Lesbia’s abandonment of his bed... might be construed as a slur on his masculinity,” and therefore he must be explicit about his “sexual credentials” in order to avoid others considering him feminine.<sup>75</sup>

The first few lines reveal the barflies’ opinions of Catullus, as he pointedly asks them, *solis putatis esse mentulas vobis* (“do you think that you alone have pricks?”) (3) and *solis licere, quidquid est puellarum, confutuere* (“do you think that you alone are allowed to fuck whatever girls there are?”) (4-5). Catullus portrays the men at the bar as considering themselves sexually superior to all other men (5), including Catullus, and as feeling entitled to have whatever women they wish, including Lesbia. Catullus’ voice in this poem, hypermasculine and aggressive, serves to reassert the poet’s sexual authority. As with *carmen* 16, in which Furius and Aurelius accuse Catullus of being *male marem* (“hardly a man”), the barflies “seem to think that they are the only men, the only ones with penises,” and in response, just as Catullus abuses Furius and Aurelius (*pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*), he threatens the barflies in this poem with an equally aggressive act: *non putatis ausurum me una ducentos irrumare sessoros?* (“do you think I won’t dare to facefuck all two hundred in your seats?”).<sup>76</sup>

As Wray argues, Catullus’ primary concern, at least according to his subject, seems to be the homosocial relationship between himself and the other men in the bar, as he needs to save face since Lesbia has left him. However, what Wray overlooks is Lesbia’s centrality to the situation and to Catullus’ reputation. While Catullus is in danger of losing his sexual authority and masculine status, as we see with the attitudes of the barflies in the first few lines, and is therefore very concerned with how other men view him, the poem is also centered on Lesbia’s actions and she is still a significant player in the poem. Although Catullus’ relationship with

<sup>75</sup> Lindsay Watson, “Catullus and the Brothel-Creepers: *Carmen* 37,” *Antichthon* 43 (2009): 124.

<sup>76</sup> Wray, *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood*, 82.

other men is just as important as his private relationship with Lesbia, if not more so, this poem addresses worries concerning both the poet's homosocial (concerning societal reputation) and personal (romantic) relationships.

Within Catullus' personal, and often more feminine, sphere, the barflies serve as a point through which Catullus can describe his relationship with Lesbia, who has left him. Although Lesbia is not specifically mentioned until line 11, she is a dominating presence throughout the first ten lines, as Catullus strives to reassert his sexual authority. In lines 6-8, Catullus threatens the barflies with rape (*irrumare*) in order to correct the imbalance caused by Lesbia's choice of the barflies over Catullus, and then states that *namque totius vobis frontem tabernae sopionibus scribam* ("I will paint all the front of your bar with dicks") (9-10). While it may at first appear that these actions are a result of the homosocial relationship for which Wray argues, Catullus is driven to these actions all the more so by his anger over Lesbia's departure. As Lindsay Watson explains:

It is their sexual access to this particular puella, an access now denied him, that is the wellspring of Catullus' anger against the barflies: an anger realised not in the impossibly hyperbolic mass rape threatened in 6-8, but in the bedaubing of the front of the taberna with phallic graffiti, a gesture which stigmatises it as a cheap brothel and inscribes Lesbia (*scribam*) as a two-bit whore (9-10).<sup>77</sup>

While Catullus' poetry often concerns itself with the poet's relationship with other Roman elite males, in this case, his actions are motivated more by a desire for Lesbia and personal emotion at the breakup than out of a fear of public ridicule. By marking the *taberna* as a brothel through his graffiti, Catullus is insulting not only his rivals, the barflies, but also Lesbia, the primary target of his invective.

Furthermore, the hypermasculine invective of this poem, while appearing similar to the threats leveled at Furius and Aurelius in *carmen* 16 (*pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*), are

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<sup>77</sup> Watson, "Catullus and the Brothel-Creepers: *Carmen* 37," 127.

complicated in this poem by the poet's emotional distress over Lesbia's betrayal. Catullus' overly-aggressive and impossible threats *una ducentos irrumare sessoros* ("facefuck all two hundred of you in your seats") does much more than merely establish his own masculinity. As a hypermasculine and overblown display of male sexual dominance, Catullus' invective overcompensates for the feminine traits he exhibits elsewhere in the poem, even bordering on a lack of *continentia*. His brief mention of his relationship with Lesbia in lines 11-14 (*puella nam mi, quae meo sinu fugit, amata tantum quantum amabitur nulla, pro qua mihi sunt magna bella pugnata, consedit istic*, "For my girl, who ran away from my lap, loved so much as no girl will ever be loved, for whose sake I fought great battles, sits there," 11-14) contains a phrase, *amata tantum quantum amabitur nulla* ("she who was loved so much as no other girl will be loved"), which is also found in other poems describing his love for Lesbia and his distress at her betrayal:

Fulsere quondam candidi tibi soles,  
cum ventitabas quo puella ducebat  
amata nobis quantum amabitur nulla.

Once the sun shone bright for you, when you would go wherever your girl led,  
she who was loved by me as much as no other girl will be loved. (8.3-5)

Nulla potest mulier tantum se dicere amatam  
vere, quantum a me Lesbia amata mea est.

No woman can truly say that she was so much loved, as much as my Lesbia was  
loved by me. (87.1-2)

The similar phrase ties these poems together and references Catullus' excessive passion for Lesbia, a trait for which he could have been ridiculed just as Pompey was for his excessive love of his young wife.<sup>78</sup> This effeminate passion, juxtaposed with the hypermasculine threats Catullus makes in *carmen* 37, provides a brief moment of delicacy for which Catullus then compensates throughout the rest of the poem with his invectives.

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<sup>78</sup> Plut. *Pomp.* 48.5-7.

Similarly, Catullus' homosocial relationship with the barflies gives the poet a platform through which he can address concerns in his relationship with Lesbia. His threats to rape the *contubernales* are laced with references to Lesbia's promiscuity, tying in his failed relationship with her to his rivalry with the men:

...the physical and locational integration of Lesbia with the *contubernales*, the primary reason for Catullus' anger, is underscored by the pointed repetition of the sexually charged *sedere* (6) in the shape of *sessores* (8) and *consedit* (14).<sup>79</sup>

Rather than Catullus occupying the dominant role in the relationship, Lesbia dictates its entire course. She entrances Catullus completely from the very beginning, rendering him helpless to refuse her (*carmen* 51). Then, once the relationship has begun, Lesbia continues to control him, and he is driven to feminine excess in his passion for her (*carmen* 5). Lesbia also determines the relationship's end, leaving him bereft and heartbroken (*carmen* 11).<sup>80</sup> Now that the relationship has ended, and Lesbia has moved on to other men, Catullus is filled with "soft," feminine emotions within his personal romantic life which threaten his masculine status and reputation among other men, driving him to excess passion in his anger against the *contubernales*.<sup>81</sup> The entire relationship is marked by excess and lack of *continentia* for Catullus, a dangerous position given the ease with which a Roman man might lose his masculine status.

Catullus' hyperbolic threats to rape the *contubernales* (7-8) serve a much different purpose here than in poem 16. Instead of working to distinguish the poet from his poetry, as in his threats to Furius and Aurelius, here Catullus' hypermasculinity is complicated by his emotions and motives which fit into feminine Roman constructions rather than masculine ones.

<sup>79</sup> Watson, "Catullus and the Brothel-Creepers: *Carmen* 37," 127.

<sup>80</sup> See esp. the final stanza: *nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem, qui illius culpa cecidit uelut prati ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam tactus aratro est.* ("And she must not count on my love, as before she could, which by her fault has fallen like a flower at the meadow's edge, after it's been touched by the passing plough.")

<sup>81</sup> See, for instance, poem 85: *Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris? / nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.* ("I hate and I love. Why do I do this, perhaps you ask? I do not know, but I feel it happening and I am tortured.")

In striving to prove his masculinity as unquestionable, Catullus' poetic persona becomes overly enraged, almost to the point of displaying a complete lack of *continentia* and therefore the very masculine status he is trying to exude. Rather than focus on his insecure position as the one who has been left rather than the one doing the leaving (which gives Lesbia the ultimate control over him in her dictation of the end of their relationship), Catullus instead goes on the offensive to detract attention from his misfortune and loss of control. Now that Lesbia has left him, Catullus constructs her image far differently from descriptions of her while they were still together. Before, Lesbia was *formosa*, but now she has degraded to a lowly prostitute who spends her time soliciting sex from mangy drunkards.<sup>82</sup> The barflies serve as an easy target for Catullus to distract from Lesbia's dominance by giving him an opportunity to express his own sexual authority.

Overall, Catullus' hypermasculine expressions are not only a display of masculinity but are also complicated by feminine characteristics and a lack of *continentia* in his passionate threats. Catullus uses hypermasculine invectives to reassert the dominance lost in his relationship with Lesbia, overcompensating for his excess *eros* and *cupido* in his personal life through obscenity and threats of rape in his homosocial dealings with other men. However, his reasserted dominance continues to question his position between Roman boundaries between genders, as Catullus continually introduces feminine traits and constructs into his homosocial relationships and interactions. Ultimately, even Catullus' supposedly masculine characteristics place him in a liminal space between Roman gender boundaries as he overcompensates for his feminine characteristics.

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<sup>82</sup> Lesbia's characterization as a prostitute is also mentioned in other poems. For instance, 58.5, *glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes*, "she jerks off the grandsons of greathearted Remus."

## Section V: Masculinity and *Eros*

The most striking feature of the construction of gender within the Catullan corpus is its ambiguity. Catullus' poetry contains some of the most sexually aggressive imagery in extant Latin literature, typically categorized as masculine according to Roman constructions of gender, and at the same time some of the most passionate and romantic, or "soft" (*mollis*), expressions, which Romans would consider more feminine. It is difficult to reconcile these two Catulluses – the male and the female voice. However, reconciliation may not even be necessary. Catullus ultimately appears to occupy some sort of liminal space between traditional masculine and feminine spheres, attempting to navigate his place as a Roman elite man composing Greek-influenced erotic poetry. As one of the *poetae novi*, Catullus follows in the style of many Greek poets such as Sappho and Callimachus, but is influenced heavily, of course, by his own culture and time. The *poetae novi* rejected many traditional social and literary norms, but certain concerns about masculine image and the tension between masculine and feminine characteristics remain in Catullan poetry, showcasing this liminality.

Specifically, I have argued that Catullus' poetry reveals a conflict between civic and social responsibilities and the "personal intensity of erotic experience," which for Catullus often manifests itself in an untraditional, feminine manner.<sup>83</sup> The conflicting identities and constructions of gender within Catullus' poetry can be read as a conflict between Catullus' masculine persona and his relationship with Greek poetry (often erotic), which often lead the poet toward more feminine forms of expression. Throughout the Catullan corpus, his feminine attitudes occasionally occur in direct tension with his civic identity and masculine reputation, creating a problem when considering what categorizes each sphere and what actions are proper

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<sup>83</sup> Charles Segal, "'Otium' and 'Eros': Catullus, Sappho, and Euripides' 'Hippolytus,'" *Latomus* 48 (1989): 818.

for those spheres according to Roman *mores*. Catullus often responds to these blurred lines with hypermasculine invective and invocations of public concepts such as *pietas*, but these attempts to reestablish gender boundaries cannot be fully successful, as seen in Catullus' invectives which border on a lack of *continentia* in *carmen* 63.

As I have shown, we can see this tension between Roman spheres of gender roles in many of Catullus' poems, sometimes following a masculine pattern which is then complicated by feminine imagery or emotions, and at other times revealing a feminine voice to which the poet attempts to respond with masculine invective. Catullus' translation of Sappho is perhaps the best example of this, as we can see how Catullus transforms a poem originally written by a Greek woman (albeit one who constantly crossed back and forth between traditional gender roles in her poetry) with his male perspective. The poem is not entirely altered from the feminine voice, however, and the final stanza, which appears to be original to Catullus' version, serves as a sharp warning to the poet against falling into a pattern of passion and excess *otium*, signs of femininity.

Other poems also reveal a tension between Catullus' masculine status and personal romantic relationships, especially in his relationship with Lesbia, who, although a woman, dominates the relationship, determining its beginning and end as well as the personal interactions between herself and Catullus. Catullus' hypermasculine invective, while serving to assert his sexual superiority and unquestionable masculinity over those around him, is also unstable, serving a second purpose of revising the narrative surrounding his subservient role in his relationship with Lesbia. After she leaves him, determining the end of the relationship against his will, Catullus strives to alter the narrative of their relationship, painting her as a lowly prostitute who has fallen so low she is no longer worthy of his love. However, this proves to be a difficult story to sell, as Catullus' poems are rife with anguish over her absence, and even in his final

dismissal of her, he uses imagery which likens him to a virginal bride on her wedding night (*amorem, qui illius culpa cecidit velut prati ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam tactus aratro est*).

Ultimately, constructions of gender and identity within the Catullan corpus resist categorization into a strict dichotomy. Far from confounding interpretations of Catullus' poetry, however, the impossibility of relegating each poem to one sphere or the other reveals latent tensions concerning Catullus' masculine persona and personal pleasure, especially in excess, as well as his relationship with Greek poetry. As I have shown, the poetic voice in the Catullan corpus constantly transgresses gender and social boundaries, blurring the lines between masculine and feminine. Catullus' ever-changing voice emphasizes the nebulous nature of an individual's status within the carefully policed spheres of ancient gender and sexuality as well as his own tensions regarding his relationship with Greek poetry.

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## Acknowledgments

First to my advisor, Brian Lush, who has helped me this year not only by reading countless drafts and guiding my project to what it has become, but also with his endless support and encouragement as I went through the harrowing experience of applying to graduate school.

Second to my professors Nanette Goldman, whose Latin class freshman year inspired me to become a Classics major, and Beth Severy-Hoven, whose classes and scholarly work instilled in me a passion for the study of gender and sexuality in the ancient world.

Third to my family, especially my parents, Jeff and Linda Gorton, who always supported me in the pursuit of my passions and my dreams, and my grandfather, Thomas Snodgrass, whose encouragement and donations of *Archaeology* magazine led me to apply to graduate school.

Last to my love, Evan Moorman, for believing in me even when I couldn't believe in myself.