

Francis Bahk

Professor Gallagher

Catullus

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Progression of Love in Catullus' Poetry

Catullus was a Roman poet of the late Republic era. He was well-known for writing emotional and romantic poetry, which he addressed to a woman under the pseudonym Lesbia. His love for Lesbia was complex, starting with infatuation and lust and ultimately ending with heartbreak. Throughout his poems, as Catullus writes about grappling with intense emotions, he offers us a glimpse into the human experience of feeling love.

However, Lesbia's identity remains unknown, making it difficult to determine: what was the precise nature of her relationship with Catullus? Although some scholars suggest that Lesbia was a high-society Roman woman – Clodia Metelli – she may have been a courtesan or a fictional character altogether. Moreover, the nature of Catullus' relationship with Lesbia is also complex. Catullus does express deep affection for Lesbia, but later on he depicts a tumultuous relationship characterized by betrayal and adultery.

The issue is important for several reasons. First, Catullus' poems are among the most celebrated works of Roman literature. For many readers, speculating about the true nature of the enigmatic Lesbia can offer a glimpse into the cultural milieu of antiquity. Moreover, the complexities of human relationships have not changed so much even thousands of years after

Catullus and Lesbia. The themes of joy and affliction, fear and envy, and more are present in Catullus' poems, and they offer timeless insights into the meaning of being human.

Below, I will analyze several of Catullus' poems regarding Lesbia to find clues that may help to find an answer to the driving question. The fact that poems dedicated to Lesbia comprise a significant portion of Catullus' total works and touch on themes related to love and heartbreak might suggest that Lesbia was an actual person with whom he had a intricate relationship.

Catullus' second poem is known as *fletus passeris Lesbiae*, which translates to "the weeping of the sparrow of Lesbia." Although this poem does not explicitly answer the driving question, it nevertheless provides clues about the intimacy of the relationship. At the start of the poem, Catullus writes about the *passer deliciae meae puellae* and how Lesbia – who is implied to be the *puella* of Catullus – plays (*ludere*) with the bird (*quicum*) and holds him in her lap (*in sinu tenere*). After Catullus, according to Gregory Nagy¹, elaborates on how Lesbia extends her teasing finger towards the skittish little bird, he writes "whenever she, the gleaming object for my pleasure (*cum nitenti desiderio meo*)" feels like (*lubet*) being merry (*iocari*) – I do not know (*nescio*) – [with] what (*quid*) [is] dear (*carum*) and [is] comfort (*solacium*) of her own pain (*sui doloris*)." Then Catullus states: "if only I were able (*possem*) to play (*ludere*) with you (*tecum*, refers to the *passer*) as if (*sicut*) with that very girl (*ipsa*) and to lighten (*levare*) the sad concerns (*tristis curas*) of my soul (*animi*)!" Catullus essentially envies the sparrow since it receives affection from Lesbia. This possessiveness might suggest something about the intensity of the relationship – that Catullus had a deep emotional, and potentially romantic, attachment to Lesbia.

Similar to poem 2, poem 3 is an extension of the story about Lesbia's sparrow and it's intriguing since it's multi-faceted. Although it conveys sad news about the bird, it also uncovers

¹ From Gregory Nagy, "Two small comments on Catullus Two: an iconic effect and an expression of delight in what is beautiful."

Catullus' expectation that he will replace the bird as the object of Lesbia's love. Poem 3 also contains the theme of jealousy, from which we can safely begin to believe that Catullus loved Lesbia. The last two lines are important and are read: Oh poor (*miselle*) sparrow! Now (*nunc*) because of your own work (*tua opera*), the swollen (*turgiduli*) eyes (*ocelli*) of my own girl are red (*rubent*) having to be cried (*flendo*). Catullus is angry at whatever caused the sparrow to die. This shows he cares for Lesbia and does not wish for her to be brokenhearted over it. In fact, he is so upset that he asks Venuses and Cupids to mourn as well. On the other hand, it is sort of unclear whether Catullus is expressing faux sorrow for the sparrow. It seems clear that Catullus finds neither the bird's death nor Lesbia's weeping a positive event. However, Catullus seems to be preoccupied with how Lesbia feels about the bird rather than with the death of the bird itself. Catullus ends the poem angry that Lesbia feels sad, yet towards the sparrow he only feels pity. This subtlety in Catullus' writing suggests that he cares deeply about Lesbia.

Poem 5 is perhaps Catullus' most emotionally charged expression of his desire for Lesbia. Known as "*Vivamus, mea Lesbia* (Let us live, my Lesbia)," the poem showcases the ability of Catullus to convey raw emotions. Catullus writes *da mi basia mille* (give me a thousand kisses), *deinde centum* (then one hundred), *dein mille altera* (then another thousand), *dein secunda centum* (then second hundred) with the result that eventually, *cum milia multa fecerimus* (when we have made many thousands), *conturbabimus illa* (we will confuse/mix those kisses), *ne sciamus* (in order that we may not know), *aut ne quis malus invidere possit* (and in order that not anyone is able to envy), *cum tantum sciat esse basiorum* (when he knows many kisses there were). This sort of repeated emphasis on kissing reflects both the physical and emotional intensity of the relationship between Catullus and Lesbia. Moreover, Catullus desires an overwhelming number of kisses. His use of hyperbole shows that he clearly has an insatiable

longing for an intimate connection with Lesbia. Furthermore, Catullus says *soles occidere et redire possunt* (the suns are able to fall and return), *nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux* (when the one brief light has fallen for us), *nox est perpetua una dormienda* (the night is one continuous sleeping). The rising and setting of the sun symbolizes the transience of life's fleeting moments. However, Catullus suggests that even though the light – symbolizing life – will disappear someday, their love will continue during their sleep. These words capture the essence of eternal devotion, and thus Catullus' desire for permanence in a relationship. Furthermore, Catullus challenges societal norms; *rumoresque senum severiorum omnes unius aestimemus assis* (let us estimate all rumors of stern old men [at the value of] a single penny). This shows Catullus wants his love with Lesbia to transcend all social conventions. By disregarding conservative judgements, Catullus essentially wants her to know that their relationship is highly important to him. Finally, Catullus alludes to his desire for a sort of secrecy; returning to *conturbabimus illa*, by keeping the number of kisses hidden, they can ensure that their love remains free from malicious envy that may impurify it.

In poem 5, Catullus defines very high expectations for love. However, this sort of context hints at the possibility that his relationship with Lesbia might become turbulent. Having established that Catullus has feelings for Lesbia in poems 2,3, and 5, how does their relationship evolve?

Poem 8 is known as “*Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire* (Wretched Catullus, stop playing the fool).” After Catullus finds out that *nunc iam illa non vult* (now already that girl – Lesbia – does not want [you]), he writes to himself about his struggle to break free from his unrequited love for Lesbia. This poem is very heartfelt, since I think it reads as an intense, emotional plea for solace. In the first line of the poem, Catullus admonishes himself to accept the reality that his

love with Lesbia is lost: *Ducas quod vides perditum perisse* (consider what you see having been perished to have perished). He also reminisces about the time when *candidi soles fulsere quondam tibi* (the suns were once bright for him) because *puella nec nolebat* (the girl was not refusing). However, since Catullus is now *impotens* (powerless) to change her, he must be resolute by moving on from his playful moments with Lesbia: *nec sectare quae fugit* (do not pursue the one who flees), *nec miser vive* (nor live miserably), *sed perfer obstinate mente* (but endure with a resolved mind).

Catullus tells Lesbia *vale*, and that now *nec te requiret* (he does not require her) and *nec rogabit invitam* (he will not ask the unwilling girl). From these lines alone, Catullus seems to accept that he must sever emotional bonds, since what is not meant to be is not meant to be. But he then says *at tu dolebis, cum rogaberis nulla* (but you will hurt, when you will have been asked by no one), seeming upset and bitter towards Lesbia. He returns even more coldness by asking her rhetorical questions: *vae te, quae tibi manet vita* (woe for you, what life remains for you?), *quis nunc te adibit* (now who will approach you?), and even *cui videberis bella* (to whom will you seem beautiful?). What an internal battle Catullus faces! His obsession with Lesbia, who is far beyond his reach, causes so much emotional turmoil that he blames both himself and Lesbia in this poem for the destruction of their relationship. We know that Catullus is upset from the rejection, so it is unsurprising to see that his bitter tone persists in poem 11.

Poem 11 is called “*Furi et Aureli comites Catulli* (Furius and Aurelius, friends of Catullus)” and it is about dumping a promiscuous girlfriend. The poet writes bitterly *cum suis vivat valeatque moechis* (let Lesbia live and be happy with her paramours), *quos simul complexa tenet trecentos* (three hundred of whom she holds at once in her embrace), *nullum amans vere* (loving not any truly), *sed identidem omnium* (but repeatedly) *rumpens ilia omnium* (breaking the

private parts of all men). However, Catullus' simile in the last line is important since the tone suddenly shifts to sadness; referring to his love, it reads *velut prati ultimi flos* (as if the flower of the farthest meadow), *praetereunte postquam tactus aratro est* (after it was touched by the passing plow). Since Catullus believes that Lesbia is not loyal to him, he does not want her anymore; thus, his love for Lesbia is like a flower killed by a plough – it will never come back.

Catullus revisits the theme of paradoxical feelings of love and hatred in poem 85, known as “*Odi et Amo* (I hate and I love).” The poem – renowned for its drama and brevity – reads: *odi et amo. quare id faciam* (why I do this), *fortasse requiris* (perhaps you ask). *Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior* (I do not know, but I feel it being done and I am tormented). Catullus' words reveal that Lesbia has brought him immense joy at times, but also unbearable pain that consumes him. Catullus shows – by example – how the complex nature of human emotions can profoundly impact one's well-being. In “Catullus: The Lesbia Cycle,” Julia Pan writes that the poet, with just four syllables, “is able to convey the raw, inner turmoil that love and passion wreak upon him.” Catullus revisits his high views of Lesbia in poem 86, where he says that she is so beautiful that *omnibus una omnis subripuit Veneres* (she stole from all the Venuses from all together²). Venus was the goddess of many things, including fertility, beauty, and love. By suggesting that Lesbia stole these things, Catullus implies that she possesses those attributes. Also, in poem 86, Catullus says there exists a beautiful woman named Quintia, who many think is *candida, longa, recta* (bright, tall, straight). However, he protests that she is beautiful, for she has *nulla venustas* (not any charms), and on the other hand, Lesbia does possess *venustas* that make her desirable for reasons other than physical attractiveness.

² Translated by Julia Pan, Pg. 17 of Discentes Magazine

Pan, who is my primary secondary source, argues that Lesbia and Catullus' relationship is characterized by obsession and codependency, which is excessive psychological reliance on a partner. I agree with this depiction because throughout Catullus' catalog, the poet's words drip with symptoms of his profound codependence on Lesbia. He craves her attention and reciprocation of his love in poems 2 and 3. He feels extreme highs and lows based on their interactions in poems 5 and 8. He relies on her for emotional fulfillment. Moments of bliss are followed by heartache, and vice versa, and the volatility intensifies his emotional rollercoaster. In fact, according to David Konstan, the poet's idea of love is a sort of inherent and uncontrollable "divine madness." Moreover, Konstan posits that Catullus' experience is like being under a "spell of overriding passion" and that he can be regarded "as the subject of temporary insanity." This sort of description makes sense since it agrees with Catullus' characterization as an impassioned love poet who fearlessly delves into his own feelings, without disregarding the reasonable possibility that Catullus was probably eerily obsessed with Lesbia.

The relationship between Catullus and Lesbia was clearly imbalanced, since the former needed the latter to complete his life, but not vice versa. Imbalanced relationships are unstable, since one partner might take the other for granted. In fact, early warning signs about an imbalance occur in poem 2, where Catullus writes that Lesbia provokes sharp bites from her sparrow with the tip of her finger, while *carum nescio quid lubet iocari* (jesting a light joke of it). In fact, Catullus confesses his pain in poem 87; he writes *nulla potest mulier tantum se dicere amatam vere* (no woman is able to truly say that she has been loved) *quantum a me Lesbia amata mea est* (as much, my Lesbia, as you were loved by me). Pan writes that there existed an uneven power dynamic in the relationship, with Catullus having trusted Lesbia more, so his resentment stemmed from experiencing betrayal. Also, an important idea occurs in the last two lines of

poem 87 and read *nulla fides ullo fuit umquam foedere tanta* (not any faithfulness in any bond ever was) *quanta in amore tuo ex parte reperta mea est* (as was discovered in love for you from my part). The fact that the poet made a point to write *mea parte* in a relationship hint that the trust and commitment that he gave to her were not reciprocated. The resulting distance and disconnection might have left Catullus feeling inadequate and frustrated. Therefore, Catullus and Lesbia, partners in a one-sided relationship, were doomed to lead each other to disappointment.

So far throughout the discussed poems, Catullus produced a wide range of moods, from hopeful and starstruck to sorrowful and bitter, from utopian to realistic, and back to passionate. But Poem 109, one of Catullus' final works addressed to Lesbia, is special because it is rather optimistic for how late it appears. In this poem, Catullus specifically focuses on his desire for perpetual love, which is intriguing since in many previous poems, he condemns her unfaithfulness. He first recalls how she once promised him that *hunc nostrum inter nos* (this love between us) will be *perpetuum* (everlasting). It is important to realize that lovers might promise anything to each other – precisely because they are pleasantly in love. Therefore, Lesbia might have meant what she said during her relationship with Catullus, but she does not mean it anymore. Nevertheless, Catullus begs: *di magni, facite ut vere promittere possit* (great gods, bring about that she is able to promise truly). He follows up these startling words of optimism with *liceat nobis tota perducere vita* (may it be permitted for us to prolong in the entire life) *aeternum hoc sanctae foedus amicitiae* (this eternal pact of holy friendship). It is hard to tell whether Catullus is delusional in this poem. By appealing to religion, he adds a sense of solemnity to his words. In such a way, he sounds serious about having an eternal bond with Lesbia.

According to Konstan, love was tolerated in a young man in ancient Rome, insofar as he understood that it would not “corrupt the responsibility of a Roman citizen toward...his dignity.” The truth is that Lesbia not only rejected Catullus, but she also had affairs with other men while they were together. Catullus did have fond memories of Lesbia; yet for him to put someone who did these things and severely damaged his emotional well-being on a pedestal shows that his capacity to think rationally might be impaired. Remaining in such a one-sided relationship is proof that Catullus is hopeful for a future with Lesbia. On the other hand, this implies that he does not respect himself very much. I think what torments Catullus most is exactly this fact: that during the process of trying to love Lesbia, he loses his own self-worth. He expresses this sort of resentment by insulting her in some of his poems.

This leads to a remarkable point about Catullus. He portrays in his poetry that he possesses a great degree of introspection, which allows him to recognize the potentially destructive nature of his fixation on Lesbia. In fact, Lesbia makes Catullus feel such violent and heartbreaking emotions, and this teaches him how unforgiving love is. These sensations should have deterred Catullus from loving her – he even asks himself in poem 76, *quare iam te cur amplius excrucies* (therefore why now will you torture yourself further) – but oddly, they do not.

Catullus’ poetry offers a rich exploration of love, in particular owing to his creative writing ability. I do not think Catullus ever fell out of love with Lesbia. He expresses hostility towards Lesbia in several grand sequences of poetry, but his anger is only temporary, since he does not hate who she is. Rather, he hates that she does not love him back.

To resolve the question about Lesbia’s identity, scholars believe Lesbia to be Clodia Metelli – a Roman noblewoman who belonged to the prominent ancient Roman family, Claudian gens. Writers such as Cicero and Ovid lived around the same time as Catullus, and they mention

her by name. Also, Clodia and Lesbia share a reputation for being beautiful and behaving scandalously. These clues suggest Gaius Catullus's beau was probably Clodia Metelli.

Although Catullus was not able to fulfill his desire for timeless love, along the way he created technically brilliant literature that is studied around the world. I am drawn to his writings because he is relatable; most people have had to grapple with the ferocity of love, and Catullus' poetry contains valuable wisdom in the form of lively anecdotes. Tragically, Catullus was ignorant. He wished for an eternal bond where there was only evanescent passion.³

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.

It is difficult to suddenly give up a long-lasting love, it is difficult, but it is agreeable by which route you should execute this thing. This is the one prosperity. This must be conquered completely by you, do this, whether it not possible or possible.

³ "Two Kinds of Love in Catullus" by David Konstan

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