

Uritur et loquitur: (mis)understanding passionate speech in Catullus 83
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Catullus 83 presents a triangular conversation between Lesbia, her husband, and the poem's speaker. In the presence of her husband, Lesbia curses and insults the speaker. Her insults are, for opposing reasons, a source of happiness for both her husband and the speaker. The poem turns on a question to an unnamed addressee: *mule, nihil sentis?* (83.3); the crux of the issue is who understands what in this ambiguous conversation. Building on discussions of audience roles and interpretation in the Catullan corpus (Pedrick 1986; Janan 1994; Nappa 1999), I suggest that this poem puts on display the issue of interpretation. At stake is control of language and the implications this has for shaping circumstances and defining relationships. In this paper, I argue first that the unspecified addressee destabilizes the interpretation offered by the poem's speaker. Next, I turn to the way that the multiple verbs for speaking focus attention on the specificity and reliability of language. Finally, I suggest that the question of the addressee's understanding in this poem connects with the wider concern throughout the corpus with interpretation and poetics. If we consider as a third possible referent for *mule* the external reader of the poem, this question opens up the relationship between the poet and reader, commenting on the poet's control over his own language.

The structure and language of the poem subtly creates an ambiguous situation, centered on who should be characterized as foolish for his lack of understanding. The issue of interpretation and authority comes to the fore in the question *mule, nihil sentis?* The most immediate referent for the vocative *mule* is Lesbia's husband, described in the previous line as *fatuus* for his happiness at the situation. The structure of the poem certainly suggests that he is the presumptive addressee. The question prompts the speaker's counterintuitive interpretation of the situation: Lesbia's constant insults are really a sign of her passion. If we accept the speaker's logic, then the husband seems indeed to understand nothing. But, as her husband's happiness indicates, there is another plausible interpretation: Lesbia's curses indicate her genuine anger and dislike. This suggests that the speaker himself is the more appropriate referent for *mule*, putting him in the uncomfortable position of one who does not understand the import of the scene unfolding before him. I argue that the space between these competing interpretations bears the weight of the poem.