

Lesbia Poems 87 through 109: A Happy Ending to an Unhappy Love Affair?
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In a chapter entitled, “The Lesbia Poems,” Julia T. Dyson writes: The final five “Lesbia poems [in the elegiac epigrams] tell a simple story, one perhaps best summarized in the trite but timeless formula, “They lived happily ever after” (*A Companion to Catullus*, ed. by M.B. Skinner [Oxford 2007] 273). Professor Dyson appears to be the first to propose that the reader is to construe the series of Lesbia poems as concluding romantically, with Catullus and Lesbia reconciling forevermore. In light of the fact that in the majority of Lesbia poems the lover-poet verbally attacks Lesbia or his rivals, is bitter over the failed relationship, or wallows in self-pity because of unrequited love, Dyson’s assertion that the series closes on a note of “happily ever after” is astonishing and deserves further scrutiny. Accordingly, my paper will examine carefully the final five Lesbia poems in the elegiac epigrams (87, 92, 104, 107, and 109). I intend to show how Catullus manipulated language and verbal reminiscences in these five poems to undercut meaning. The following example will illustrate my strategy.

Poem 107, on the subject of reconciliation with Lesbia, is one of the most rapturously joyful poems in the entire collection. In this poem something remarkable and totally unexpected happens to Catullus: Of her own accord Lesbia returns to him. Catullus’ intense emotion in Poem 107 is reflected by numerous verbal repetitions and numerous elisions. Catullus’ repeated description of himself as “desiring Lesbia” (*cupidus*, 1, 4, 5), however, appears to undercut the intense happiness that characterizes this poem. The adjective *cupidus* assumes prominence as a result of the hiatus in line 1 and through its repetition in lines 4 and 5. As a result of the prominence given to this adjective, the attentive reader cannot help but recall the only other instance in the elegiac epigrams where *cupidus* occurs, and that instance is Poem 70. There Catullus remarks that “what a woman says to her lover who desires her ought to be written on wind and running water.” Verbal interplay with Poem 70, therefore, serves to heighten Catullus’ incredulity at Lesbia’s unexpected return and to introduce a note of skepticism to this otherwise joyful poem. Because Poem 107 serves as companion piece to Poem 109, sharing with it the theme of reconciliation, the reminiscence of Poem 70 in Poem 107 also undercuts the meaning of Poem 109. It has largely passed unnoticed just how extraordinary this last Lesbia poem of the collection is. Here Lesbia tells Catullus *exactly what he wants to hear* by offering to him a relationship that is mutual and everlasting (1-2); in other words, she offers the lover-poet a relationship on his terms. Poem 109 exemplifies precisely the point that poem 70 makes, thereby invalidating a sentimental interpretation of these final Lesbia poems.