

The Sparrow's Mistress: Form and Meaning in Catullus 2

In this paper I will discuss how less noted features of the “amatory wish” type of Hellenistic epigram are superimposed upon the well recognized hymnic structure of Catullus 2. In considering the effect of this crossing of genres I will offer a new way of interpreting the sex and gender dynamics at play in the poem.

When discussing models for c. 2, scholars (following Bishop 1966) usually call attention to AP 7.195 and 7.196, mock hymns from the Hellenistic Anthology, and to Sappho fr.1, from which Catullus draws both themes and the particular image of sparrows (Brenk 1980; Ingleheart 2003). Despite its hymnic structure, c. 2 does not conclude with a prayer, which is normally the climax and the point of a hymn as a whole, but rather with a contrary-to-fact wish (*tecum ludere sicut ipsa possem/ et tristis animi levare curas*). The form and content of this wish (and, in fact, what precedes it) are evocative of a sub-type of Hellenistic epigram, the amatory wish. This is “the old theme of the lover who imagines what it would be like to be something with which the object(s) of his desire comes into close physical contact,” (Bing 1988: 31) or, as Thomson (1997 ad loc) paraphrases it, “‘Would that I were’ <some jewel, say, on my mistress’ breast>.” Other than Thomson’s passing mention, this important model has been almost completely neglected in discussions of Catullus 2, perhaps because of the unusual variation that Catullus makes on it, wishing not to be in the position of the bird, but of the girl. I will analyze the anatomy of the amatory wish and discuss how Catullus’ crossing of its form and themes (longing and alienation) with those of a hymn (a type of poem that inherently acknowledges the inferiority of the speaker) creates a picture of a powerful *puella* and an alienated, even emasculated, poetic ego.

The suggestion of an unbalanced relationship between the poet and his beloved evoked by these two forms is amplified by the strongly sexual language used to describe the way the

puella plays with the sparrow. Much ink has been spilled over what we are to make of the sexual suggestions in the poem. Contrary to other erotic metaphorical readings, which understand the *passer* as representative of the phallus (following Genovese 1974), I will argue that the subtle evocation of a sexual scenario is not an end in and of itself—concealed sexual allegory being foreign to the sexually explicit art and culture of Rome (Skinner 2005)—but rather that the sexualized play and the inverted (as I posit) gender roles that it suggests are broader metaphors for interpersonal power dynamics. Given the hierarchically ordered Roman understanding of sex and gender, the manner of the girl’s prodding, controlling play with the small, passively responsive sparrow genders her as masculine in order to suggest her dominant identity. When the poet wishes he could play with the sparrow he wishes to be in the position of the girl, that is, to be in a masculine position of control. The suggestion that he does not currently enjoy this position—that he is in a position more like that of her submissive pet—is in keeping with the gender inversion that is typical of Catullus’ self-presentation in the poems about his mistress.

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