

The Sparrow's Death at Troy: A Metapoetic Reading of Catullus 65

At no time does Catullus cite his brother's death outside of a literary context. Catullus first mentions his loss in the opening lines of poem 65, citing grief as the ostensive reason for his inability to write the poetry requested by Hortalus and as the necessary force behind his shift to elegiac meter (*maesta carmina*). He refers to his brother's death twice in poem 68, once just before explaining to M/Allius how his writing has been hampered by the move to Verona (19-40) and again in the midst of a neoteric tour de force (89-100) that ultimately serves to prove his ability to make M/Allius immortal through verse. The final and most well known treatment of his brother's death is poem 101, wherein Catullus offers one last gift (*munere*) on the occasion of his brother's death. Yet even this poem, a *prima facie* dedication of funerary rites, is arguably a literary game; the term that Catullus uses to describe his offering – *munus* – is the same term found elsewhere with explicit reference to poetic gifts (14.2, 20; 65.19; 68.10, 32, 149), hence Cederstrom's (1981) identification of the *munus* as the poem itself.

In light of these observations, this paper presents a radical rereading of poem 65 as an explicitly ludic and metapoetic remark on Catullus' metrical and generic shift from epic (poem 64) to elegiac (poems 65-116). I begin with a close reading of the opening lines of poem 65 as a programmatic statement (Batstone 2007) in the same vein as the opening lines of Propertius' *Elegiae* and Ovid's *Amores*, paying particular attention to each poet's relationship to epic, their proposed shift to elegiac meter and their unilateral placement of the metrically loaded "foot" – always at the end of a line and always within the couplet's metrically shorter line. I then explore the possible relationship between Catullus' lament for his *frater* with that of the *passer* in poem 2 and the potential poetic implications that may result given the *passer*'s significance as a title for Catullus' corpus (Lorenz 2007). I conclude with a few brief remarks as to Catullus' position as a proto-elegist before noting several new interpretations of poems 68 and 101 that this rereading engenders.

Works Cited

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Batstone, William W. "Catullus and the Programmatic Poem: The Origins, Scope, and Utility of a Concept." pp. 235-253.

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