

Love Poets in Fragments:  
Portrayals of erotic torment in Catullus 76, Sappho fr. 1, Theocritus *Idyll* 30

This paper aims to add to the already extensive discourse on Catullus' engagement of his poetic models through a close reading of poem 76, the longest of the elegiac poems (aside from the 'long poems' 65-68) and his most extensive engagement in the poet's *propria persona* on the *topos* of suffering in the final stages of love's demise. Poem 76 demonstrates an interest in engaging both the archaic and Hellenistic literary past through its pronounced evocations of Sappho fr. 1 and Theocritus *Id.* 30. Critics have long been aware of Sappho's influence on Catullus' poetry. It seems however that in the case of poem 76, the extent of Sappho's influence until now has rested on reminiscences noted to the language and meter of Catullus 11 and Catullus 51, his own adaptation of Sappho's fr. 31. As concerns the Hellenistic poet Theocritus, critics suggest that he has left far fewer traces than Callimachus in Latin literature before Vergil's *Eclogues*. This scarcity of traces leads one study to attempt a list of "possible echoes of Theocritus" in Catullus, which includes only four poems, all of which fall within the 'long poem' collection. Here I propose to fill in some of the gaps in the scholarship related to the role of these models on Catullus 76. To this end, I hope to demonstrate that in poem 76 Catullus reveals a pronounced engagement with Sappho's fr. 1 which itself treats the theme of the abandoned lover and dramatizes the poets' efforts to deal with her erotic afflictions *in propria persona*. Catullus 76 also demonstrates a close affinity in theme, language, and dramatic technique with Theocritus *Idyll* 30, whose own experiments in aeolic verse (*Idylls* 28-30) mark his similar interest in engaging his archaic lyric models. Though scholars like Richard Hunter interpret Theocritus' exercises in aeolic lyric as engaging not Sappho but Alcaeus, due primarily to their pederastic context, other scholars like F. Griffiths argue that these verses should be read as, "ambitious adaptations of Sappho as pederastic poems." It is not our task here to render judgment on this critical issue. But Catullus' interest in Theocritus' aeolic lyrics on the *topos* of the abandoned lover may mark his own figuration of Theocritus as a mediating link between himself and Sappho's archaic lyric love poetry. Within the Catullan collection, poem 76 stands in a profoundly prominent position due not only to its complex treatment on the *topos* of the abandoned lover, but also because it interfaces with other poems throughout the collection by way of theme, language, and tone: (8, 11, and 30 in the polymetrics and 70, 72, 73, 75, 85, and 104 in the elegiacs). As such, Catullus' choice to bring this particular poem into conversation with Sappho and Theocritus not only renders more significant the role he has granted his models, but also intensifies the texture of meaning their poems will be felt to activate *throughout the corpus*. Thus, Catullus'

readings of Sappho and Theocritus in poem 76 provide insights into his construction and representation of erotic pathos, the lover's psychological fragmentation, and the unique vision he offers on the *topos* of suffering in the final stages of love's demise.

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