

A Literary Love: The Identical Identities of Catullus and Lesbia in Poems 51 and 68

At several points in the Catullan corpus, the poet assumes that he and his beloved share the same feelings and patterns of behavior. At the end of poem 2, Catullus wishes that he too could play with his *puella's* sparrow to lighten his cares just as she does (2.9-10). He implies that their cares are similar and that they might be alleviated by the same mechanism. Near the end of the collection, Catullus memorably argues that, although Lesbia curses him, she must still love him, since he constantly curses her, yet he loves her more than ever (poem 92). In both of these poems, Catullus implies a similarity between himself and his beloved. In poems 51 and 68, the poet goes much further and, through complex literary references, he completely conflates his own identity with that of his beloved, bringing them closer together in poetry than would be possible in reality.

From the first lines of poem 51, Catullus adopts the role of Sappho through his authorship of her poem. Though he has suited the poem to his own purposes, in a sense he sees what she saw, feels what she felt, writes what she wrote. However, unlike Sappho, Catullus identifies his beloved as “Lesbia,” an adjective that would best describe Sappho herself. In this single poem then, Catullus and his beloved seem to share the common identity of the literary figure Sappho, suggesting that “there is a reciprocity of symptoms between Catullus and his beloved, so that not only Catullus is Sappho, but also the woman who bears the Sapphic epithet,” (Miller, 191).

A similar phenomenon occurs in poem 68, but here the literary conduit is the mythological character, Laodamia. Catullus begins his epic simile by comparing his mistress to Laodamia as she entered the home of Protesilaus (70-74). However, this initial comparison quickly fades in the mind of the reader as Catullus changes his subject to those who, like Protesilaus, died at Troy, including the poet's own brother. Without setting aside his initial comparison, Catullus implicitly identifies himself with the bereft Laodamia as well, allowing himself and his beloved to share the identity of this single literary figure. This shared identity allows for a useful ambiguity throughout the remainder of the simile; through the single figure of Laodamia, both the poet and his beloved feel a love deeper than Hercules' abyss (105-118) and a passion beyond that of

the aged parent (119-124) or the wanton dove (125-128). Their feelings for one and other are perfectly identical, since they share the same identity, a level of reciprocity only possible in the realm of the poem.

Miller, Paul Allen. "Sappho 31 and Catullus 51: The Dialogism of Lyric." *Arethusa* 21 (1993): 183-199.