

## Brother-as-Lover: Intimate Fraternity in Catullus

Non-normative relationships abound in the Catullan corpus. The more colorful ones include his effeminate subservience to a masculinized Lesbia, his homoerotic adoration for friends like Calvus (Ormand 2009), and his fascination with incest (Watson 2015, c. 67, 78-9, 88-91, 111). I argue that his relationship with the *frater* mentioned in c. 65, 68 and 101 should be included among these unusual dynamics. By employing Bradway and Freeman's theory of queer kinship and kin-aesthetics, I will examine how Catullus queers the traditional idea of "brother" into an erotic and marital figure. Queer kinship theory regards the formulation of kinship ties as, partially, a kinetic process of *doing*, "or forces acting on existing mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and also on aesthetics, or the principles of artistic and symbolic organization." Studying these two forces together offers kin-aesthetics as a framework, which (de)construct and (re)form how we conceive of and articulate the signs and symbols that comprise kinship (Bradway and Freeman 4). I suggest that this study will broaden the potential meaning and application of queer kinship when a very normative relationship is queered, and perhaps illuminate as-yet unconsidered nuance regarding the Roman taboo on incest.

Scholars such as Seider 2015 have explored Catullus' unconventional use of traditional feminine modes to mourn his *frater*, drawing on the maternal and bridal figures of Procne, Aedon, Laodamia and Penelope. However, they have yet to consider the erotic implications of Catullus persistently feminizing himself while grieving his deceased *vir*, alongside Catullus' fascination with incest elsewhere in the corpus. The queering of a preexisting familial bond, instead of borrowing kinship terminology to describe a queer relationship, provides a point of entry into the application of queer kinship theory, and complicates our readings of Catullus'

closest ties. Indeed, “*frater*” was a weighty signifier for the Romans, designating lifelong obligation because of consanguinity or legal adoption, or expressing intense and enviable affection between friends (Bannon 1997). The term was also used in erotic contexts, such as Martial calling *frater* and *soror* “naughty names” (*nomina nequiora*) (*Epigr.* 2.4), or in Petronius’ *Satyricon* and tumultuous affairs between so-called *fratres* Encolpius, Ascyltos, and Giton (Williams 2010). Catullus has no qualms about harnessing the latter aspects of the term by repeatedly deriding Gellius for his incestuous affairs, already starting to resignify *frater*’s connotations within his corpus beyond the simple definition “brother”—brother *and* lover.

While Catullus typically weaponizes accusations of incest to insult his rivals, his portrayal of his relationship with his own *frater* in erotic and marital terms paints the sympathetic image of a bride mourning her newly-deceased husband. Catullus identifies with the grieving Procne and Aedon in c. 65, which also characterizes him as Penelope, who, in Book 19 of the *Odyssey*, references the same figures while grieving for her husband. 65 is a probable “cover letter” to the following poem, 66, recounting the aggrieved Berenice left behind while her *vir* and *frater* Ptolemy III went off to wage a foreign war—as Catullus was, as his own *frater* did. While Catullus mourns the death of his *frater*, he sends a poem of a wife doing the same. Catullus’ lament continues in 68, where he more fully embodies the position of a young widow by likening himself to Laodamia and his *frater* to Protesilaus. As he says, at the death of his *frater*, Catullus’ entire *domus* is destroyed; he cannot continue their line, as a woman robbed of her husband cannot.

Catullus continually redefines the sign *frater*, from a simple man with siblings, to an erotic figure, one who indulges in physical excess with his female relatives, *and* one as consumed with grief and as helpless as a widow for her husband. He queers the term’s definition

and its application; rather than a man calling his dearest friend, or his lover—those outside his normative family—his *frater*, as Romans sometimes did, he lavishes eroticism and romantic and sexual yearning into the relationship. By doing so, depending on his target, he casts fraternal bonds as worthy of derision, or complex expressions of severe grief, and deep—respectable?—affection, making the Catullan *frater* very queer indeed.

#### Works Cited

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