

The Semantics of Sexuality; Obscenity in Catullus and Martial

Content Warning: This presentation examines rhetoric involving implied and explicitly threatened sexual assault, and due the aim of the analysis translates several obscene terms explicitly, including several words that translate to modern-day sexual slurs.

This paper explores the use of vulgar language in the works of two of Rome's most renowned poets, Catullus and Martial, focusing on their respective poems *Catullus 21*, *Catullus 16*, *Martial 2.47*, and *Martial 2.28*. By analyzing the use of obscene language in these texts, the paper examines how the poets use figurative and literal meanings to convey not only humor and insult but also underlying social anxieties about masculinity and sexuality.

The paper analyzes the specificity of sexual language pertaining to different sex acts involving both male and female participants, with particular attention given to how obscenity functions as a tool of social commentary. For example, the paper examines the difference between the verbs *pedicare* “to have anal sex with” and *irrumare* “to have oral sex with” and their passive counterparts in force, intensity, literal and implied meaning.

This analysis also investigates the purpose of vulgar language in poetry, questioning whether it serves merely as shock value or as a more profound vehicle for critiquing gender and sexual norms in ancient Roman society. Through this lens, the paper highlights the intersection of linguistic form and cultural anxieties, shedding light on the complex relationship between language, sexuality, and identity in the Roman world.

Works Cited

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