

Objects of Illumination: Lamps, Desire, and the Reflexive Dynamics of Viewing in Symptotic Vases, Hellenistic Epigram, and Latin Poetry

This paper explores the erotic and reflexive functions of manufactured objects –above all lamps– in Greek and Latin poetry and symptotic vase painting. Lamps, indispensable in the nocturnal space of the symposium, emerge as privileged symbols of the scopic drive: they both enable and figure the act of looking. As Lissarrague has shown, the krater can stand metonymically for the symposium itself, but lamp imagery marks a subtler reflection on vision, belonging to what Frontisi-Ducroux has described as the painter’s repertoire of self-referential objects –mirrors, veils, partially open doors, etc.– that thematize viewing, and particularly the erotic gaze. The lamp’s dual role as material object and visual metaphor situates it at the threshold between illumination and desire, between the mechanics of seeing and the fantasies seeing generates.

Drawing on Steiner’s and Bravo’s account of Greek conceptualizations of desire as instigated by artifacts, from Pandora to the erotic phallus-vase, and on Iff-Noël’s analysis of epigrammatic speaking objects, I argue that lamps in epigram and symptotic vase painting condense a complex semiotics: they dramatize the elusiveness of the beloved, the non-reciprocating quality of desire, and the active force of vision itself. Read along with personified objects of poetry –such as Philodemus’s and Meleager’s bed-side lamps (*Palatine Anthology* 5.4 and 5.8), Catullus’s speaking bed (c. 6, see Hutchinson), Propertius’s personified bed and lamp, and Martial’s lamp that speaks only to vow silence (14.39: *Dulcis conscia lectuli lucerna, / quidquid vis facias licet, tacebo*)– lamps invite us to consider how inanimate objects mediate intimacy while staging the paradox of being both gossipy witnesses and mute accomplices.

In epigrammatic contexts, the lamp often appears as a confidante of eros, its flame evoking both desire's force and flickering instability. In vase painting, lamps not only literalize the conditions of viewing but signal the painter's own power to arouse desire through the scopic nature of the symposium. By tracing these connections between text and image, Greek and Roman traditions, this paper highlights the ways in which objects of illumination become objects of love –works of art that both show and withhold, illuminating not only the scene before the eye but also the mechanics of desire itself.

The paper proceeds in two parts. The first shows how, in Greek sympotic vase painting, lamps not only stage erotic scenes but comment on the act of viewing itself, and thus on the painter's art. The second part turns to the literary staging of personified and often speaking objects in Greek epigrams and Latin poetry, particularly in Catullus, Propertius, and Martial. These texts dramatize the paradox of inanimate objects that both reveal and conceal desire, thereby extending the semiotics of sympotic artifacts into the realm of voice and narrative. Across both parts, the analysis highlights how Greek and Roman traditions converge in using objects, and especially lamps, to illuminate the interplay of eros, vision, speech, and materiality, and to reflect on the multi-sensorial mechanisms of desire itself.

Works Cited

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