

The Politics of *pietas*: Catullus, Vergil, and the Augustan Reimagining of the Roman Self

Catullus' imprint on Vergil's *Aeneid* emerges in a variety of settings across his corpus, infusing key episodes, such as Dido's speeches to Aeneas in Book 4 or the death of Nisus and Euryalus in Book 9, with a distinct ethos. Scholars posit that Vergil uses Catullus' deeply individualistic point of view to stress pathos (Nappa 2007), irony (Putnam 1989), or add complexity to his characters (Gale 2021, 233-41). In this paper, I revisit the relationship between the two poets. By probing the construction of *pietas* and the dynamics of gender inversion in both Catullus and Vergil, I argue that Vergil engages with Catullus to explore the dissonant, multifaceted nature of *pietas* and its fraught connections to the ideological project of the Roman Empire under Augustus.

I begin by analyzing *pietas* in Catullus. In Roman thought, *pietas* represents a familial, social, and political ideal that the poet reconfigures in his declarations of love for Lesbia. He frames his *pietas* toward her as socially sanctioned, analogous to marital love or devotion to blood relations (e.g. c.72, Ross 1969). Catullus thus asserts his love for Lesbia as a quintessentially Roman value and casts her infidelity as adultery or betrayal of familial *pietas*. This moral conundrum is further complicated by a striking gender reversal: Catullus often assumes the role of the abandoned woman, while Lesbia becomes the predatory, phallic aggressor (e.g. 11, 58), her aggression even aligned with Rome's imperial violence.

Turning to Vergil, I show how he reactivates this Catullan semiotic network in select passages in the *Aeneid*. The Catullan version of *pietas*, with its emotional and moral dissonance, surfaces in the Dido episode and in the deaths of Euryalus and Pallas, where *pietas* is simultaneously valorized and destabilized. Ultimately, I argue that Catullus' poetry, and the

competing concepts of *pietas* it generates, enables Vergil to articulate a profound tension between Republican and Augustan conceptions of the self, society, and empire.

Works Cited

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