

Catullan Similes of Loss and Gain: Poem 68b and Grief's Emotional and Poetic Upsides

Lyne (1980, p. 52) describes Catullus 68b as “Probably the most extraordinary poem in Latin.” Feeney (1992, p. 220) agrees except he would remove the word “probably.” Feeney (p. 34) writes that the “sheer volume of similes” in 68b is “without comparison in ancient literature.” He argues that the strangeness of the similes in the poem invites the reader to reflect on the difficulty of capturing experience with words.

A close examination of Catullus's similes, especially those in 68b, illuminates certain emotional and metapoetic dimensions of his work. The similes of 68b do not just emphasize problems of expression; they depict two advantages of Catullus's grief over the loss of his brother: a greater ability to take the frustrations of his romantic life in stride, and a burst of poetic inspiration, following a temporary block.

First, in terms of the emotional advantages of Catullus's profound grief, Hubbard (1984) identifies 68b as a turning point, in which Catullus represents himself as adopting a more realistic view of love. In the *polymetra*, Catullus was frequently disappointed in Lesbia's failure to live up to his ideals; in 68b, he presents himself as willing to accept whatever Lesbia offers. This more realistic view seems to be triggered by the death of his brother, the immense pain of which he emphasizes both in 68a and 68b. My paper argues that there is, in Catullus's poetry, a progression in the similes that parallels this shift from an idealistic to realistic perspective. While many of the similes in the *polymetra* and the *epithalamia* depict losses, all of the similes in 68b involve a gain or positive event of some kind. As an example of a “simile of loss,” poem 11 ends with the famous simile in which Catullus compares himself to a flower struck by a passing plow (22-24). As examples of “similes of gain,” the similes of 68b include: the mountain stream (58-

63) that serves as a consolation to weary travelers, the draining of a swamp (107-112), and the eleventh-hour birth of an heir (119-124). (Note also that the similes of loss tend to mimic the fall of a golden age, while the similes of gain tend to feature innovations of the iron age.) Catullus, I argue, uses similes that track and reinforce the presentation of his emotional self.

Second, the similes of gain represent a burst of poetic creativity following a period of unproductive mourning. In the two dedicatory poems, 65 and 68a, Catullus claims he is unable to write due to sorrow. Poems 66 and 68b, by their very existence, contradict these claims. Skinner (2003) rightfully has pointed to similarities between claims of Catullus in these dedicatory poems and the traditional *recusatio*, in which the poet poses as unwilling or unable to compose in a certain genre. Bright (1976, p. 109) writes that 68a, with Catullus's assertion that he is unable to write, "creates an air of expectancy" while 68b "releases the tension." It is not only the poems themselves that prove that Catullus is, in fact, able to write; certain similes in the poems reinforce this. Poem 65 ends with a simile of an apple rolling out of a girl's lap (19-24), while the first simile of 68b involves a *perlucens rivus* ("a transparent stream") flowing from a mountain (58). Catullus uses the words *prosilit* ("spring forth"), *pronus* ("turned forward"), and *praeceps* ("headlong") to describe the motion of both the apple and the stream. Both of these similes can be interpreted as representing the poetic inspiration that bursts forth after a period of mourning. Furthermore, the continuous stream of similes of gain that bursts forth in 68b is itself a representation of the flood of creativity that may follow a period of unproductive grief. How appropriate that in a poem featuring Protesilaus as a central figure, the word *prosilit* contains so much meaning.

Bibliography

- Bright, David F. 1976. "Confectum Carmine Munus: Catullus 68." *ICS* 1: 86-112.
- Feeney, Denis C. 1992. "'Shall I Compare Thee?' Catullus 68b and the Limits of Analogy," in Tony Woodman and Jonathan Powell, eds., *Author and Audience in Latin Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 33-44.
- Hubbard, Thomas K. 1984. "Catullus 68: The Text as Self-Demystification." *Arethusa* 17.1: 29-49.
- Lyne, R. O. A. M. (1980). *The Latin Love Poets from Catullus to Horace*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Skinner, Marilyn B. 2003. *Catullus in Verona: A Reading of the Elegaic Libellus, Poems 65-116*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.