

Stripping their Spoils: Lesbia and *glubit* in Catullus 58

The word *glubit* in Catullus 58 has long been a puzzle. *Glubo* normally appears in agricultural works, where it describes stripping bark or fleecing sheep. Its use in the last line of poem 58 is the only occurrence outside of Cato and Varro and is unique in Catullus' corpus:

*Caeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa,
illa Lesbia, quam Catullus unam
plus quam se atque suos amavit omnes,
nunc in quadriviis et angiportis
glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes.*

The rarity of the word and its association with Lesbia, described here as a common prostitute, have attracted a lot of attention. Though there is no consensus, interpretations have tended towards either a sexual metaphor or a financial one: according to the first, *glubit* describes Lesbia pulling back the foreskin, either in masturbation or *fellatio* (Adams 1982, Jocelyn 1979, Skinner 1991); in the second, the verb describes Lesbia fleecing the aristocracy of their wealth (Muse 2009).

But I suggest there may be another association of *glubit* here that has been overlooked. *Spolio* also comes from the agricultural sphere and is virtually synonymous with *glubo*. Indeed the author of the TLL article on *glubo* uses *spolio* as a gloss. Unlike *glubo*, however, *spolio* is widely attested outside of agricultural texts, where it means to rob or steal or strip off clothing, including the act of stripping an enemy of his armor on the battlefield. New Comedy is especially relevant here, given its influence on Catullan language, characters and scenes (see e.g., Skinner 1971, Nappa 2001, O'Bryhim 2007). Plautus regularly uses *spolia* and other words

denoting spoils (e.g. *exuviae*) to indicate theft and despoliation, and importantly for us, often does so in connection with the behavior of *meretrices* (see e.g. *Asinaria* 204; *Bacchides* 969, 1094; *Casina* 819, etc.). I suggest that Catullus drew from the rich nexus of sex, money and military imagery in Plautine comedy to describe the dynamics of betrayal in poem 58. Metrical reasons kept him from using *spoliat* in the emphatic position where we find *glubit*; he may also have preferred the sound of the latter. But the context of poem 58, with its anguished lover and rapacious prostitute, would have enabled a Roman reader at least to think of *spoliat* when reading *glubit*.

If this is right, the martial imagery suggested by *glubit* adds a new dimension to interpretations of the poem. More than an act of sexual aggression or financial hoodwinking, Lesbia figuratively strips “the descendants of great-hearted Remus” of their armor, as if she were a victorious general, and they her captive prey. This connection is bolstered by the relationship between sex and Empire elsewhere in other Catullan poems, in particular those targeting Mamurra and poem 11, where Lesbia’s aggressive love is also set in the context of agricultural and imperial imagery (Skinner 1991, Konstan 2000). The reference to Remus suggests that sexual domination threatens to defeat Rome and that Rome’s generals behave no better than prostitutes.

I conclude with a striking description of Clodia/Lesbia from Cicero’s *Pro Caelio* (ch. 52):
tunc aurum ex armario tuo promere ausa es, tunc Venerem illam tuam spoliare orna mentis,
spoliatricem ceterorum . . . ?

Cicero, who describes Clodia elsewhere as a *meretrix*, also paints her as a *spoliatrix*, and in a way that combines martial and comic imagery (Geffcken 1973). If we take *glubit* as a substitute for *spoliat*, then Catullus describes Lesbia in precisely the same way.

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