

A Reappraisal of Catullus 2 and 3

In this paper, I reinvestigate the *passer* problem of Catullus 2 and 3. At surface level, Catull. 2 presents the image of his lover “Lesbia” and her pet sparrow (*passer*), with whom she plays when she is sexually frustrated (5-8). Catull. 3 follows with a mock dirge for the sparrow, now dead. Whether the *passer* ought to be interpreted as a literal sparrow or as an obscene allegory for Catullus’ penis has been long debated (Hooper 1985; Jocelyn 1980; Jones 1998). When reconsidering linguistic evidence, the reception of *passer Catulli* by later Roman poets, and the actual content of the poems, a third interpretive option emerges: perhaps the *passer* refers to Lesbia’s genitalia. Ultimately, I argue that the *passer* can be read this way and its polyvalence—that it can be interpreted as a literal sparrow, as Catullus’ penis, and as Lesbia’s genitalia—matches Catullus’ interest in exploring gender dissonance in his poetry.

As Hooper (1985) points out, the sparrow had sexual connotations in both Latin and Greek literature—on one end of the spectrum, as an attendant and chariot-puller of Aphrodite (Sappho 1) and Venus (Apul. *Met.* 6.6), on the other as a phallic euphemism (Festus *Gloss. Lat.* 313.26). In contrast with the many animal metaphors used for male parts, Adams (1982) notes that few attestations of animal metaphors for female genitalia exist in Latin literature, none of which include the sparrow or any other bird. Adams also tells us, however, that *pinnae* (“wings”) and *pinnacula* (“little wings”) were used to refer to a woman’s labia, and that *gremium* can refer to a woman’s uterus or vagina (Ter. *Eun.* 585; Catull. 67.30; Stat. *Theb.* 1.234), as can *sinus* (Tib. 1.8.36.; Ov. *Fast.* 5.256). With this in mind, Lesbia’s necessarily winged *passer*, held *in sinu* (2.2) and never moving *a gremio* (3.8), takes on new meaning.

References to the *passer Catulli* by later Roman poets are also key in understanding its valence (Jocelyn 1980; Hooper 1985). Martial's several references to the *passer Catulli* indicate that he understands it to be an obscene allegory for the phallus (Hooper 1985). Ovid's allusion to the *passer Catulli* in *Amores* 2.6, a mock dirge for his girlfriend's parrot, tends to be interpreted similarly. The beginning line (*Psittacus, Eois imitatrix ales ab Indis*), as Hooper notes, hearkens to the opening of Catull. 2, beginning with the species of bird and even marking it an *imitatrix*. *Imitatrix*, an extremely rare lexeme denoting a female imitator, is an interesting choice, however, considering the far more common and non-gender marked *imitator* also works metrically.

The interactions between Lesbia and her sparrow in the poems have been a site of interpretive difficulty. Some images work in favor of interpreting the sparrow as an obscene allegory—especially when such images are framed with verbs of broad semantic ranges that include sexual meanings, such as *devorare* (3.14), *noscere* (3.6), *ludere* (2.2; 2.9), and *appetere* (2.3). The inclusion of 2b—a reference to Atalanta—for Hooper cements the sexual subtext for the *passer* poems: Catullus prefers Lesbia's touch to his own. While some of the masturbation allegories work with *passer*-as-penis, others make more sense if the *passer* refers to Lesbia's genitalia (e.g., 2.3-4 *cui primum digitum dare appetenti/et acris solet incitare morsus*).

None of this is to say that the *passer* cannot be interpreted as a literal sparrow or as Catullus' penis; rather, that it may also be interpreted as Lesbia's genitals, and that these "otherwise irritating inconsistencies" (Hooper 1985) are the result of a triple entendre. Besides being typically clever, Catullus' *passer* triad fits his programmatic exploration of boundaries between "male" and "female"—similar instances of gender fluidity and reversals have been observed throughout Catullus' poetic corpus (Skinner 1993; Wray 2001; Clark 2008; Catull. 11, 51, 63, 76). Reading Catull. 2 and 3 in this way—as an exploration of gender boundaries and

sexual experiences—demonstrates further the depth of Catullus’ poetic intricacies and reinforces a significant part of his poetic program that informs our understanding of gender and sexuality in ancient Rome.

Bibliography

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