

Wealth, Women, and Whores: The Interaction between Money and Women in Catullus

In ancient Rome, most literary evidence concerning the lives of women comes through the lens of men. This paradox necessitates that every statement must be taken with a grain of salt. This is even more true when dealing with subjects that may damage the image of a man, such as the relationship that women had with money. It is not impossible, however, to discern some truth about a woman's economic power from the slurry of skeptical sources in the ancient world.

This paper uncovers some kernels of said truth by offering a detailed analysis of Catullus' treatment of money and women, which culminates in his characterization of Lesbia. The dual focus of my paper subverts the tendency of Catullus scholars to address women and issues of money separately (see, for example, Dyson's focus on women 2007). I will undertake a philological analysis of selected poems from Catullus' corpus in combination with a study of Roman culture.

The first part of the paper will address Catullus' attitude towards and interaction with money in general. This is a very complicated topic, since Catullus walks a fine line between his self-representation as an impoverished poet within his poetry (e.g. 13.7-8) and his extremely negative reaction to any suggestion that he may not be as wealthy as he pretends (eg. 10.24 and 33-4). The issue becomes even more complex when women enter the picture. In poem 10, for example, Catullus meets a very well-dressed woman, and *repente*, "suddenly," associates her obvious wealth with prostitution instead of high social status (10.3; see Olsen 2002). This biased attitude against wealthy women reappears in Catullus' characterization of Lesbia.

The second part of my paper will offer a close reading of Catullus' *Salax taberna* (37.1) in conjunction with Cicero's depiction of Clodia Metelli's house (Cic., *Cael.*, 49). Ellis, 1889,

has suggested that this *taberna* actually represents Lesbia's house. A detailed study of Catullus' and Cicero's language supports this reading, and offers insight into the existence of suspicions about how wealthy women used their money and property. Both buildings are characterized as places of prostitution, highly unsuitable for upstanding Roman matrons. There is a constant traffic of Roman men drawn in and influenced by women. The power this sway gave women was a real threat to Roman men.

Part three will explore how these concepts can be applied to Lesbia. Lesbia is a notoriously unstable character, vacillating wildly from an innocent maiden (e.g. 2.1-3) to a passionate lover (e.g. 5.7-9), and finally landing on a voraciously eager whore (e.g. 11.18-20). Lesbia's quick transformation from pure maiden to whore can be more easily understood through the lens of poem 10. The mini-epic of 68 then begins to develop a more stable dimension for Lesbia: that of a wife. Certain language used throughout this portion of the poetry hints at a subversion of the usual, gender-defined power relations between Catullus and Lesbia, building up to her role in the elegiacs and offering a warning about the power of a wealthy woman (Dyson 2007, 267). The elegiacs fully realize Lesbia as a quasi-patroness. This characterization is a subtle one, maintained by Catullus' continued use of the language of patronage (eg. *officium* c.f. 75.2, *foedus* c.f. 87.3 and 109.6), but it suggests that Lesbia may have been able to wield some political power. I hope to show that Lesbia's characterization represents several stereotypes of wealthy women and the threat they posed to the male dominated political and social sphere.

In conclusion, Catullus highlights a deep connection between money and sex, and brings out the precarious nature of a wealthy woman's social standing. He also, however, reveals that women's access to and usage of money was not quite as restricted as has been traditionally believed. My paper invites scholars to extend this analysis to other Roman works, suggesting

Cicero's *Pro Caelio* as a starting point. This text may even focus on the same woman (Clodia Metelli has been traditionally associated with Lesbia), and I would not be surprised to see in it the same conclusions drawn in this study of Catullus.

Bibliography

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