

I. Introduction

This paper will seek to offer a fresh interpretation of the *passer* found in Catullus' trilogy. It will be hypothesized Lesbia's *passer* represents female genitalia, not male, in an allegorical reading of poems 2, 2b and 3. This integrates with the hypothesis of Thea Thorsen, who has proposed that Catullus' Lesbia is a metaphor for the poetry of Sappho.

In support of this hypothesis, the first portion of this paper will begin with a literature review, summarizing the interpretive history of the *passer* in Catullus' poems. It will then proceed to critique the usefulness of Martial in defining the *passer*, and demonstrate the ways in which Cicero's invective against Clodia Metelli may have influenced interpretation of Catullus' poems by later readers. It will conclude by demonstrating the integration of this new allegorical reading with the hypothesis proposed by Thea Thorsen.

The second portion of the paper will turn to language use within the poems themselves, examining two elements which support the new allegorical reading. Specifically, it will examine the use of the subjunctive in lines 2.9–10, indicating that the poet himself does not have possession of the *passer*, and the use of direct speech in poem 2b, indicating locution of a person other than the poet.

II. Part One: Is the *passer* just a *passer*?

i. Disputes in Defining the *Passer*

As noted by Alexander Lee, sparrows make terrible pets (Lee 2021). Prior to the poems of Catullus, there is no evidence of anyone in Rome keeping sparrows for this purpose (Jones 1998).

A 15th century Catullan scholar, Angelo Poliziano, was the first to imply a secondary meaning for Catullus' sparrow, though his interpretation faced disagreement (Hooper 2007). In 1684, Isaac Voss proposed more openly that the passer represented male genitalia, adding that it alluded to masturbation (Jones 1998).

In modern scholarship, this debate arose again as H.D. Jocelyn argued against conjecture about the passer, disputing allegorical interpretations (Jocelyn 1980). Kenneth Reckford further cautioned against applying contemporary perceptions to ancient literature, encouraging, "the decent scholarship of indecency" (Reckford 1996).

Yet, readers are confronted with Catullus' own assertion that poetry should be arousing (poem 11). Over half of Catullus' polymetrics and epigrams involve sexual or invective content (Richlin 1992, p. 144). Acknowledging this, much contemporary scholarship has sought to move beyond 'bowdlerized' versions of the Latin epigrams (Mulligan 2019, p. 111).

Greek poetry includes both graphic sexual description and euphemism, extending to descriptions of women (ex. Dioscorides 5.54 and 5.55). Yet unlike the Greeks, the Romans believed that taboo utterances could pollute the speaker and listener (Mulligan 2019, p. 112). Catullus thus carefully merged Greek and Roman tradition, using obscene language in ways which still maintained his reputation as a 'pius poeta' (Mulligan 2019, p. 116).

Catullus' liberal use of obscene language makes its absence significant (Mulligan 2019, p. 117). Referencing earlier scholarship, Bret Mulligan suggests that this technique was used in poem 12, in which Marrucinus Asinus reaches under the table to steal a napkin.

Mulligan asks, “What are we to think when Catullus denounces Marrucinus Asinus working his left hand beneath the table?” (Mulligan 2019, p. 117).

ii. Problems with Martial as an Interpretive Source for Catullus’ Passer

In existent Latin literature, it is Martial who first offers a potentially obscene reading of Catullus’ passer, resulting in its interpretation as a male sexual organ (Mulligan 2019, p. 117). However, Martial’s Lesbia references seem directly drawn from Cicero's invective against Clodia Metelli in *Pro Caelio*, potentially indicating interpretive bias.

For example, Martial says that Lesbia paid her lovers (Martial 11.62). There is no indication of this by Catullus, but it does appear in Cicero’s invective against Clodia Metelli (Cic. Cael. 53). Elsewhere, Marital implies that Lesbia was an exhibitionist (Martial 1.34; Leen 2000). This also reflects Cicero, who blamed Clodia for publicizing her private affairs (Cic. Cael. 35).

If Cicero influenced Martial, this bias may cast his utility in doubt. Cicero’s impact could also extend to later Roman writers, such as Apuleius. This will be explored in the next section.

iii. The Unclear Relationships between Cicero, Catullus and Clodia Metelli

Cicero had an unclear relationship with Catullus, indicated in poem 49. This may have affected Catullus’ poetry. Here, a brief summary of political events is required.

Clodia Metelli, often proposed as Catullus’ Lesbia, was the sister of Publius Clodius Pulcher. This identification is based on internal evidence, and a statement made by Apuleius in the 2nd century CE (Miller 2002, p. 6). Although this attribution is uncertain, most scholars believe Lesbia is indeed Clodia Metelli (Skinner 2011).

The orator Cicero was in conflict with Publius Clodius Pulcher, and had accused Pulcher of many grave things, including homosexual prostitution and incest (Cic. Har. 42). Later, Cicero presents that Mark Antony blamed him for instigating Pulcher's murder (Cic. Phil. 2.21). Cicero's conflict with Pulcher extended to the latter's sisters. Plutarch writes that one of the women tried to persuade Cicero to divorce his wife, Terentia, and that Terentia suspected an extramarital affair (Plut. Cic. 29.2-5).

This all provides context for Cicero's invective against Clodia Metelli. As Anne Leen explains, Cicero's invective derived its power from a tradition which used accusations of sexual promiscuity to defame its female targets (Leen 2000).

Poem 49 is the only existent link between Cicero and Catullus. In the poem, Catullus thanks Cicero. Scholars have long speculated over whether his gratitude is sincere, and what Cicero might have done to earn it (Fredricksmeyer 1973). One hypothesis, put forth by Ernest Fredricksmeyer, was that Cicero facilitated a reconciliation between Catullus and Caesar (Fredricksmeyer 1973), after Catullus ridiculed both Caesar and Pompey within his poetry (ex. poem 54, 113).

Returning to Lesbia, what is clear in Catullus' poetry is that at some stage, Catullus' love for her soured. What is unclear is whether Catullus' invective poems were written before or after Cicero's *Pro Caelio* (Skinner 2011, p. 144).

Marilyn Skinner argues that Catullus' utilised intertextual echoes of Cicero's invective to expose Clodia Metelli (Skinner 2011, p. 144). For example, Skinner argues that the last chronological depiction of Lesbia has her embracing three hundred lovers (11.17-20; Skinner 2011, p. 139). This is evocative of Cicero's depiction of Clodia Metelli, a woman who "makes herself available to all" (Cic. Cael. 49).

In summary, all of this lends reason to question the original intention of Catullus, as opposed to later interpretations of his poems. This, in turn, may have affected interpretation of the passer.

Skinner adds one additional point of possible interest. In Cic. Cael. 38, the phrase used to describe promiscuity, “se omnibus pervolgaret,” was also applied to book publication (Skinner 2011, p. 139). Elsewhere, Cicero more explicitly refers to Clodia Metelli as a poetess (Cic. Cael. 64), much like Sappho.

iv. The Voice of Sappho in the Catullus’ Passer Trilogy

This brings the discussion forward to the hypothesis of Thea Thorsen: that Lesbia is a metaphor for the poetry of Sappho (Thorsen 2019, 85), much as Juventius is a metaphor for the poetry of Callimachus (Thorsen 2019, 86).

There are many poems evocative of Sappho’s writing in Catullus’ collection. For example, poem 11, in which a flower is cut down by a plough, bears similarity to a wedding-song fragment by Sappho, in which a girl about to be married is compared to a hyacinth trampled by shepherds in the mountains (Sappho fr. 105b Voigt; Thevenaz 2019).

Specific to the passer trilogy, scholars have long identified echoes of Sappho’s *Ode to Aphrodite* in Catullus’ poem 2, where the passer is introduced (Sappho 1 Voigt; Thevenaz 2019). Thevenaz argues that the ‘bellus passer’ in Catull. 3.15 recalls Sappho’s beautiful sparrows in 1.9–10. In both instances, Thevenaz notes that the sparrows take a “dark descent.”

Returning to the hypothesis of this paper, in which the sparrow is interpreted as a female sexual organ: despite its absence from existent fragments, there is reason to believe additional sexually explicit poetry by Sappho may have once existed. The Roman poet Ovid

includes a passage which depicts the poetess Sappho having an orgasm as she fantasizes, which led this writing to be censored in the Middle Ages (Thorsen 2019, p. 43).

If explicit poetry by Sappho once existed, this would explain the presentation of the passer in Catullus' trilogy, along with some later aspects of the poetess' reputation. In Tatian's *Oratio ad Graecos XXXIII*, for instance, Sappho is presented as a prostitute. Tatian identifies the poetess as a "lewd, love-sick female," and one who, "sings her own wantonness."

III. Part Two: Who Owns the Passer?

v. The Use of the Subjunctive Mood in Lines 2.9-10

Speaking of the passer in lines 2.9-10, Catullus uses *possem*, which is a first-person singular imperfect active form of *possum*, in the subjunctive mood. In Latin, the subjunctive indicates a wish or desire, not a statement of fact. This is followed by a shift back to the indicative mood in line 11.

There is no obstacle which would prevent Catullus from playing with the passer, should we identify it as a part of his body. It has been argued that he got less enjoyment from doing so, explaining the use of the subjunctive (Hooper 2007, p. 323). Yet in the poem, Lesbia is presented as playing with the sparrow to alleviate *her* suffering (*sit solacium sui doloris*), and not the suffering of Catullus. At least, this is why the poet *thinks* that Lesbia plays with the sparrow (*credo ut*). The poem also says that she plays with the sparrow whenever she cares to. This is not true for Catullus, indicated by use of the subjunctive *possem*. It may be argued that the passer, therefore, belongs to Lesbia.

vi. Direct Speech in Poem 2b

Poliziano presented poems 2 and 3 as one poem (Hooper 2007, p. 305). Likewise, the earliest hypothesized Verona manuscript is thought to have included poems 2, 2b and 3 as one poem. Yet, under many current interpretations, as Hooper summarizes in regard to 2b, "...the seemingly pointless reference to the Atalanta myth has caused serious problems" (Hooper 2007, p. 323).

The Atalanta myth is preserved in multiple variants (ex. Theocritus 3.40-42; Satyricon of Petronius 137.1-2; Ovid Met. 10.560-680; Ovid Amores III 2.29-30, etc.). To sum them up: Atalanta agreed to marry any man that could outrace her, killing those she beat. Aphrodite gave one suitor three golden apples to drop along the path, causing Atalanta to lose the race when she stopped to gather them. The resulting union was passionate.

As proposed by Marguerite Johnson, poem 2 better integrates with 2b if it is proposed that Lesbia is speaking in 2b. This is supported by the use of *mihi*, referring to the puella as the speaker, found in 2b1 (Johnson 1999). Catullus utilises direct speech elsewhere (poem 55.11-12), giving this some precedent.

Thematically, 2 connects to 2b if the poem alludes to female sexuality, with the Atalanta myth indicating marriage: an acceptable outlet for an ancient woman. This brings us back to Martial. While Martial's usefulness in defining ownership of the passer has been questioned in this paper, he seems to have held a similar concept of the action of the unified trilogy. Martial's joke about the unmarried poet Virgil is thus more of a zinger (Martial 4.14), as is his heavily inebriated comment about Nero's marriage to a castrated youth, made to a servant boy with whom Martial was flirting (Martial 11.6).

IV. In Conclusion

In closing, if an allegorical reading of the passer trilogy is adopted, there is good evidence to identify the passer with female anatomy, as opposed to male. In saying this, it is entirely possible for a poem to have both a literal and an allegorical reading: an effect which would further display the skill of the poet.

It is, perhaps, ironic that we debate ownership of the bird only when it is defined suggestively. In a literal reading, it has always been very clear: the passer belongs to Lesbia. Not Catullus.

V. Bibliography

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