# *"What's Otium Got to do With it? Catullus 51 and Sappho 31"*

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Catullus' poem 51 has long excited controversy. Its first three stanzas are a loose translation of Sappho's poem 31, which describes the speaker's reaction on seeing a woman with whom she is in love conversing with a man who "seems to equal the gods" (Sappho 31.1). In his rendering, Catullus omits Sappho's culminating fourth stanza and replaces it with one which seems to be of his own composition (Segal 1989:818), a curiously detached meditation on the pernicious effects of *otium* "leisure."

Most of the controversy focuses on that fourth stanza: why has Catullus left out Sappho's stanza, and how does his new one fit in with the rest of the poem? The reasons for the "suppression" of the original Greek verses are (curiously) "rarely discussed" (Vine 1992:253); the tone and content of its replacement are so divergent from the rest of the poem that one recent commentator went so far as to pronounce that "the fourth stanza of 51 is somehow unsatisfactory, and no ingenuity of interpretation will make it seem otherwise" (Clausen 1983:22). Some commentators have simply cut the Gordian Knot and treated the *otium* section as a separate poem (Quinn 1973:275).

Despite this rather unpromising history, it seems to me that reasonable sense can be made of the poem as a whole if we do not commit ourselves to the common, but unproven, assumption that this must be the first of the Lesbia poems, and if we consider it as an integral part of Catullus' *corpus* rather than as an isolated specimen. It is then possible, without undue ingenuity, to see the coherence of the poem itself, and also to appreciate the way in which the entire poem, including the stanzas adapted from Sappho, relates to other poems in the collection.

If we hold to the view that this is an early, or even the first, of the Lesbia poems, then what to make of it is indeed perplexing. The reasons for this supposition, however, are not particulary compelling when put to the test. Quinn (1972:58-60) provides the two most common arguments in support: one, that this is the sort of poem one composes as a "feeler" toward initiating a relationship. It certainly seems so, but that does not necessarily mean that it *is* such a poem; just as likely (or even more likely, as I will argue below) it is simply supposed to *look like* a poem of this sort. The second argument is that "It offers the only satisfactory explanation that has been advanced for the name Lesbia" (Quinn 1972: 60). But we need not suppose that Catullus required a translation of Sappho in sapphics to justify naming the recipient of his love poetry

after the Greek poet. Educated Romans would recognize the allusion to the ancient world's pre-eminent composer of love poems to women. In his own poem 35, a hendecasyllabic poem with no other apparent connection to either Sappho or Lesbia, Catullus alludes to the Lesbian poet as a sort of tutelary deity of love poetry in the phrase "*Sapphica puella/ musa doctior*" (16-17), "girl more learned than the Sapphic muse." The name of Sappho certainly seems to carry this *cachet* in the generations following Catullus when Ovid says "*Lesbia quid docuit Sappho nisi amare puellas?*" (*Tristia* 2.365), "What did Lesbian Sappho teach if not to love girls?" The name "Lesbia" indicates that the woman whom Catullus addresses is worthy of the poetry of the best of love-poets, and also might, for more sophisticated readers, carry the lusty connotations associated with Sappho's name in later Greek poetry and on the comic stage, where "she had become a stock figure" and a by-word for female lust (Barnstone 1965:xx). One might even reasonably suppose that the name "Lesbia" came first, and suggested the idea of the translation. At any rate, the supposed proof does not actually prove anything, and the adoption of the hypothesis it purportedly supports leaves us unable to make sense of the poem, once we include the fourth stanza. Given the evidence of the poem itself, and of the other poems in the collection, it seems much more likely that this is a later poem. It is difficult to find any other explanation for the fourth stanza, which does not seem designed to sway a prospective mistress. Quinn (1972:59) tentatively compares it to the "note of self-reproach" that is conventionally attached to a "passionate confession of unrequited love", such as that spoken by Vergil's Corydon at the end of the second *Eclogue* (1972 58). Corydon, however, reproaches himself for yearning for a love that is beyond his reach (all translations are my own):

> rusticus es, Corydon; nec munera curat Alexis,
> nec, si muneribus certes, concedat Iollas. (*Eclogue II* 56-57)
>
> "You are a boor, Corydon; Alexis does not care for gifts,
> nor, if you were to compete with gifts, would Iollas yield."

Catullus, on the other hand, complains that "*otium* 'leisure' is troubling you, Catullus" (*otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est,* 51.13); apparently he does not have anything better to distract him, a very different reflection on his feelings toward the object of his desire. In the end, even Quinn must confess: "I find tempting the theory that the fourth stanza was added afterwards."

Even if only that last stanza is of later composition, it demands that we consider the rendering of Sappho in light of a later understanding of the relationship between Catullus and Lesbia, since it forms only one part of what is actually a new composition.

There is good reason to believe, however, that the entire poem is a later composition. Wiseman (1985:154) points to clear echoes of poems 2-11, the first sequence of Lesbia poems in the collection. Like poem 51, poem 11 is in sapphics and contains the word *identidem*: "The repetition of the rare adverb in the same metrical position in the stanza cannot be an accident." Likewise *miser*, 'a strong word in Catullus,' appears for the first time since poem 8: "After that, the "double night" in lines 10-11 . . . has an ominous ring when we remember the bright suns of life and love in poems 5 and 8. For readers who remember those early poems, what Catullus has added to Sappho's original has a cumulatively sobering effect." It is impossible, of course, to know for certain the order in which the poems were written; what is certain is that this poem is explicitly connected with other poems describing the *end* of the relationship. It is not simply a piece of personal correspondence from the beginning of that relationship.

Catullus makes other important changes in translating Sappho's poem, all of which involve *overstating* Sappho's original statements and images. Where she says that the man is *isos theoisin*, (Sappho 31.1), "equal to the gods", Catullus strengthens the comparison by making "gods" singular and adds *si fas est, superare divos* (Cat. 51.2), "if it is permissible, he surpasses the gods;" in Sappho the man simply sits and listens, in Catullus he *spectat et audit* (51.4) "*watches* and listens", *identidem* (51.3) "again and again"; in Sappho the sight *kardian en stethessin eptoasen* (31.6), "troubles the heart in my ribs", whereas in Catullus' version it *omnis / eripit sensus mihi* (51.5-6), "snatches all senses away from me," a considerably stronger image; he adds *sonitu suopte / tintinant aures* (51.10-11), "my ears ring with their own sound" where Sappho has no auditory imagery and, finally, Catullus employs the complex and figurative *gemina teguntur / lumina nocte* (51.11-12), "my eyes are covered by a twin night" where Sappho merely says *oppatessi d' oud' en oremm'* (31.11) "there is no sight to my eyes". Sappho's description, though intense, is measured, direct, and graceful; Catullus' continual one-upmanship, in contrast, gives the poem a melodramatic feeling that the Greek poem lacks, leading Crosby and Schaeffer (1928:189) to remark that he "apes the meter but cannot preserve the charm." In addition, as Vine (1992:257) demonstrates, Catullus' third stanza "compresses" much of the imagery from Sappho's fourth stanza into the basic framework of the third. For instance, *demanat* (51.10) "drips down" echoes *kakcheetai* (31.13) "pours down", and Catullus' "eyes covered over with 'night' naturally suggest the darkness of death, and so may reflect Sappho's own climactic concluding reference to death." The result of all this overstatement is that the climax in the original fourth stanza is robbed of its effectiveness. If Vine's analysis is correct, the speaker of the first three stanzas (if not the poet himself) has painted himself into a poetic corner, and breaks off his translation in apparent frustration.

There are several possible explanations for Catullus' systematic overstatement. One

is that he was simply insensitive to the finer points of Sappho's style, and so ran roughshod over it in translating: this seems to be the view of the readers who accuse him of "aping" the original. Another possibility is that he is writing in a style suggestive of an eager, even desperate, would-be lover for whom simply quoting Sappho is not good enough. If we follow Wiseman's (1985:154) suggestion and put the first three stanzas in quotation marks, a logical relationship between the two parts of the poem emerges: "The version of Sappho in the first three stanzas was, as it were, in inverted commas; the 'Catullus' who addressed them to the woman is now himself addressed, and his malaise diagnosed." In poem 8 we see a struggle between different "voices" within the speaker, one lamenting the loss of Lesbia (*fulsere vere candidi tibi soles* [8.8], "bright suns truly shone for you"), the other putting a brave face on the situation (*vale, puella! iam Catullus obdurat* [8.12], "good-bye, girl! now Catullus is standing firm." The two parts of poem 51 also represent two different facets of the poet, the same two facets that Catullus describes in poem 85: *Odi et amo* (85.1), "I hate and I love." The translator of Sappho, the first voice in 51, "loves;" the second, the speaker of the *otium* stanza, "hates" (or at the very least, at this apparently earlier stage in the relationship, is becoming pretty uncomfortable). In poem 51 we are allowed to view first-hand the ambivalence that eventually develops into the excruciating contradiction described in 85.

Catullus goes to great lengths to make it clear to us that these are two separate voices, in large part by making the language of each one as distinctive as possible. The first three stanzas are one long sentence (as they are in Sappho's original), and the one real stop is between *mihi* and *nam* in the middle of line 6; clauses run over from lines 5 to 6, from 9 to 10, even from the first stanza to the second (and possibly from the second to the third), giving this whole section a flowing, quick-moving feeling. The enjambment creates a sense of movement appropriate to an eager lover gushing forth his feelings. The last stanza, in contrast, is heavily end-stopped; each line is a complete thought, and the thudding anaphora of *otium* or *otio* at the beginning of each line further separates them into distinct units by bringing us back to the same starting point three times over. This voice is detached and unemotional, speaking in carefully measured language and remote images ("kings" and "cities" instead of the personal feelings and reactions described in the first section). This is the cold, hard voice of reason, which sees the infatuation of the previous part of the poem as a waste of time. Clausen (1983:25) maintains that "here the poem fails: the added stanza is abrupt and inconsequent, and the mechanism of effect - *otium, otio,otium* - too obvious." And if we are looking for a linear progression from first line to last, this is so. If we see this as internal dialogue, however, it is not a failure at all: the last stanza must be abrupt, because it is an actual interrruption of the first three, and stands in intentional contrast to them. Naturally it is inconsequent, since it represents an opposed state of feeling and

thought. The difference between the two parts is reflected in both form and content.

The omission of Sappho's fourth stanza is itself a signal to the reader of a change in voice. The Greek original was well-known to Catullus' audience (Clausen 1983:24). As Quinn (1972:31) asserts, "it was important . . . that the poem should be easily recognizable as a translation; Catullus naturally used, therefore, the same metre (sapphic stanzas) as the original." Along with poem 11, which is something of a companion piece, this is one of the earliest extant poems in the meter after Sappho herself (Clausen 1983:25). Just as the audience expects Sappho's fourth stanza, where her list of physical symptoms climaxes with her metaphorical death, Catullus' unfamiliar and deflating new stanza breaks in. The abrupt ending just short of the expected climax must have been an obvious interruption, and a clear indication that the speaker was now using his own voice.

The final stanza is the last voice we hear, and so creates the final impression. It is in the speaker's own voice, unlike the previous three, in which he is quoting (however loosely) someone else, and so creates the context within which the quotation must be viewed. Several commentators have noted that this stanza "Romanizes" the poem (Clausen 1983:25, Segal 1989:817-818). More importantly, perhaps, it shows us that this poem is not intended so much as a Latin version of Sappho as it is another chapter in the Catullus/Lesbia narrative. It is a commentary on the tendency within Catullus that expresses its obsession so extravagantly in the first section, but gives up before completing the translation:

> Otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est:
> otio exsultas nimiumque gestis:
> otium et reges prius et beatas
> perdidit urbes. (51.13-16)

> Leisure, Catullus, is troubling you:
> you exult in leisure, and delight in it too much:
> leisure has previously destroyed kings and
> blessed cities.

This suggests that, first of all, leisure has created (or at least permitted) Catullus' obsessive attraction to Lesbia (hardly a testament to the quality of the relationship): it further suggests that the obsession is destructive.

The impression this poem creates is very different from that created by a poem like 5, which very clearly does depict (whenever it was actually written) an early, care-free stage of the relationship: *Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus . . .*(5.1), "Let us live, my

Lesbia, and let us love . . ." There is no dark, foreboding "second voice" here; the speaker's main concern seems to be the acquisition of kisses from his lady friend: *Da mi basia mille, deinde centum* . . . (5.8), "Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred . . ." Furthermore, poem 7 asks us to imagine that Lesbia actually received poem 5, and has responded: *Quaeris quot mihi basiationes / tuae, Lesbia, sint satis superque* (7.1-2), "You ask how many of your kisses, Lesbia, would be enough and more for me." We don't sense her presence in poem 51: the interruption of the translation before it is finished suggests that, whatever the poet's intent, the project is abandoned, and the voice that does respond is none other than the poet's own. Poem 51 is a picture of Catullus' internal struggle, not of any interaction with Lesbia.

This depiction of internal struggle connects poem 51 intimately to other poems throughout the collection. Wiseman (1985:154) has pointed out some connections to the Lesbia poems in the first part of the *corpus*. Its placement right after poem 50 is also significant. In poem 50 Catullus looks back on a day of writing poetry with his friend Licinius Calvus on a day when they were both *otiosi* (50.1), "at leisure." The leisure that allows him to write poetry in poem 50 also gives scope to his obsession for Lesbia in poem 51, creating an implicit comparison between the experience of love and that of poetic composition. In recalling the day he experiences symptoms much like love-sickness:

> sed toto indomitus furore lecto
> versarer, cupiens videre lucem,
> ut tecum loquerer simulque ut essem.
> at defessa labore membra postquam
> semimortua lectulo iacebant . . .(50.11-15)
>
> but, untamed, over the whole bed in fury
> I turned, desiring to see daylight
> that I might talk with you and, at the same time, be with you.
> But after my limbs, tired from the struggle,
> lay half-dead on the bed . . .

Even a casual reader could not fail to see an echo in 51:

> lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus
> flamma demanat, sonitu suopte
> tintinant aures, gemina teguntur
> lumina nocte. (51.9-12)

but my tongue is numb, a slender flame runs
down my limbs, with their own noise
my ears ring, my eyes are covered
by a twin night.

Both poems describe powerful physical manifestations of love. Catullus may not actually have the same erotic attraction for Calvus that he has for Lesbia: more likely, he uses the imagery of love to show the depth of his feeling for the act of writing poetry itself. This poem also describes what he expects from love, and the juxtaposition of the two poems here invites us to make that comparison; poem 50 describes a relationship that, whatever its true nature, is mutual: *reddens mutua per iocum atque vinum* (50.6), "taking turns over jokes and wine." This, in turn, is reminiscent of the idealized love of Acme and Septimius in poem 45: *mutuis animis amant amantur* (45.20), "with mutual spirits they love and are loved." Poem 51, in contrast, is one-sided, the give-and-take taking place within the mind of only one party, the speaker. The love modelled here is decidedly one-sided.

Further strong echoes of poem 51 occur later among the elegiac poems as well, particularly poem 76:

eripite hanc pestem perniciemque mihi,
quae mihi subrepens imos ut torpor in artus
expulit ex omni pectore laetitias. (76.20-22)

rip away this plague and ruin from me,
which creeping up as a numbness into my limbs
has driven out happiness from my whole heart.

The language is strongly reminiscent of 51: *omnis eripit sensus mihi* (51.5-6), and lines 9-12 quoted above. But here the true nature of Catullus' "love-sickness" is more apparent: it really is a *sickness*: *pestem perniciemque*, "plague and ruin", and even *taetrum hunc . . . morbum* (76.25), "this foul disease." This poem is part of a series (70,72,75,76,85) in the elegiac section of the collection which describes, with ever greater intensity, the self-contradictory nature of Catullus' attraction to Lesbia, culminating in poem 85 (*odi et amo* [85.1], "I hate and I love). The poet expects us to remember poem 51 when reading these, and to see that the situation being dissected so minutely in the more analytical elegiac poems is the same one that is on display in 51.

It is impossible to know precisely what was in the mind of a poet writing two thousand years ago, particularly when we have as little real biographical information

as we do for Catullus. We can very often, however, arrive at a more satisfactory interpretation of the work if we are willing to question received opinion and consider all possibilities. The difficulties in interpreting Catullus 51 stem largely from a tendency to view it as a biographical artifact, rather than as one very consciously crafted piece of a much larger literary construction. If we insist on seeing it as an authentic relic of the beginning of Catullus' relationship with Lesbia, we are left with a poem that does not make internal sense. If we examine it from a more literary point of view, we can see that Catullus uses his translation of Sappho 31 as an expression of the tendency within him that is obsessed with Lesbia, and the fourth strophe of his own composition to draw attention to the emptiness and destructive nature of that obsession.

We can also see some important ways in which it interacts with the other poems: "Catullus 51" according to Miller (1993:194) "necessarily becomes embedded because of its role within the Catullan collection" in a "complex set of both inter- and intratextual dialogical relations . . . [moving] forward and backward within the . . . collection itself, as well as back and forth between its literary sources." It is in light of these relationships that Catullus 51 makes sense, inextricably tied to the other poems by a theme that permeates this collection throughout: the internal struggle between Catullus' conflicting feelings for Lesbia. In poem 51 the poet has, from a mature understanding of the relationship, created a tableau in which we see that struggle acted out.



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