

any explanation of the pontifical decree, instead directing the senate's attention toward its own proper responsibilities.<sup>41</sup>

In any event, the pontiffs and the senate alike rejected Clodius' arguments in favor of Cicero's, a decision that had the effect of extending the jurisdiction of the *Lex Papiria* to tribunician dedications. In view of the many obstacles, not the least of which was the "die-hard *pontifex*" postulated by Nisbet (and necessarily by Cicero as well), it is small wonder Cicero took so much pride in his speech, which he eagerly published.<sup>42</sup> The verdict of the pontiffs and of the senate, however, was not quite final in 57. Strange noises and other prodigies resurrected Clodius' religious objections to Cicero's reconstruction of his *domus*. Which brought forth yet another successful oration from Cicero.<sup>43</sup> Such controversy, however, was fated to be eclipsed by the activities of those with a stake in the unholy arrangements made at Luca, in the midst of which Cicero finally rebuilt his house while Clodius went on to buy other neighboring Palatine properties.<sup>44</sup>

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41. Cic. Att. 4.2.4. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero's Letters*, p. 171, adduces parallels for the senate's request for the reasons a decision has been based on.

42. Cic. Att. 4.2.1.

43. The circumstances of the *De Haruspicum Responso* are discussed by Lenaghan, "*De Haruspicum Responso*," pp. 19–21.

44. Clodius' Palatine purchases and holdings: M. Royo, "Le quartier républicain du Palatin, nouvelles hypothèses de localisation," *REL* 65 (1987): 105–7; A. Carandini, "*Domus e insulae sulla pendice settentrionale del Palatino*," *BCAR* 91 (1986): 265–68.

A version of this paper was read to the APA in December 1992; I appreciate the comments made at that time by E. Badian. A previous draft of this paper was greatly improved by the careful reading of C. Konrad and J. Linderski. Mind you, this is not to implicate any of these scholars in my arguments or conclusions.

## LOVE AND LASERPICIUM IN CATULLUS 7

Quam magnus numerus Libyssae harenae  
lasarpiciferis iacet Cyrenis  
oraclum Iovis inter aestuosi  
et Battii veteris sacrum sepulcrum.

[Catullus 7.3–6]

Catullus' simile is rich with innuendo, as he attempts to convey the extent of his passion for Lesbia. Cyrene is particularly prominent here, for not only is it named and geographically identified, but even its founder, Battus, is named. The reference to Battus, whose tomb was a conspicuous marker in the heart of the city, serves in turn as an allusion to his descendant, the poet Callimachus, as has been widely recognized.<sup>1</sup> The cumulative details of this simile, however, apart from recognizable

1. For the Hellenistic allusions, see W. Kroll, *Catull* (Stuttgart, 1923; 1968), p. 15; C. J. Fordyce, *Catullus* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 108–9; D. O. Ross, Jr., *Style and Tradition in Catullus* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), pp. 57 and 162, n. 105; H. P. Syndikus, *Catull: Eine Interpretation. Erster Teil: Die kleinen Gedichte (1–60)* (Darmstadt, 1984), p. 101; G. O. Hutchinson, *Hellenistic Poetry* (Oxford, 1988), p. 314.

Hellenistic details, have nonetheless caused bewilderment because of an apparent lack of consistency. Quinn, for example, questions how one can “reasonably make love by at once dragging in the Libyan desert, the asafoetida-bearing district of Cyrene (with its association with foul odor) [and] the oracle of sweating Jove.” Lyne interprets *lasarpiciferis* and *Iovis aestuosi* merely as learned allusions intended “to flatter and amuse Lesbia.”<sup>2</sup>

The inclusion here of foul-smelling *laserpicum* may in fact be more significant than is generally appreciated. *Laserpicum* refers to the plant or to the juice of the plant known in Greek as σίλφιον and in Latin as *silphium*.<sup>3</sup> The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* identifies both *laser* (the juice of the plant) and *laserpicum* as asafoetida, although asafoetida in fact comes from *Ferula assa-foetida*, a related but inferior, less potent species. The confusion, however, was apparently common even in antiquity. *Laserpicum* was used as a condiment, a stimulant, and for the treatment of a number of ailments, including nervous disorders.<sup>4</sup> It was finally harvested to extinction in the province of Cyrene, which was the only place it would grow, but apparently was still being produced during Catullus’ lifetime. Attempts were made to cultivate it in Greece and Syria, without success.<sup>5</sup>

It has recently been pointed out that another use of *laserpicum* in the ancient world was as an antifertility drug.<sup>6</sup> Dioscorides, writing in the time of Claudius and Nero, says that *silphium*, when drunk with pepper and myrrh, induces menstruation (3.80) and that *Ferula opopanax* expels the menstrua and kills the fetus. The second-century physician Soranus of Ephesus, who included in his works prescriptions for birth control, lists two recipes containing “Cyrenaic juice” (ὀπὸς κυρηναϊκός), which other sources identify as *laser* (or *lacer*) *Cyrenaicum*, σίλφιον, ὀπὸς σιλφίου, or *silphium*.<sup>7</sup> If this property was known during the classical period, then Catullus’ reason for naming the foul-smelling product of the province of Cyrene in his passionate simile may at last be understood.

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2. K. Quinn, *Catullus: The Poems* (New York, 1970), p. 112; R. O. A. M. Lyne, *The Latin Love Poets from Catullus to Horace* (Oxford, 1980), p. 45. T. P. Wiseman, *Catullus and His World: A Reappraisal* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 141, would prefer to minimize the sexual aspects of poem 7.

3. Cf. RE 3A (1927): 103–14, with Suppl. 5 (1931): 972–74.

4. A. C. Moorhouse, “Two Adjectives in Catullus, 7,” *AJP* 84 (1963): 417–18, suggests that the reference to *laserpicum* may be intended to refer to Catullus’ need of treatment for a nervous condition (e.g., *vesano* . . . *Catullo*, 7.10).

5. Pliny *NH* 19.40.

6. J. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 28, calls it “one of the best [contraceptives] in the ancient world.” His claim is based on experiments with rodents showing that extracts taken from some of silphion’s surviving relatives can inhibit conception or prevent the implantation of a fertilized egg. “Ferujol, the active substance in *Ferula*, has been isolated, and in tests it has been nearly 100 percent successful in preventing pregnancy up to three days after coitus at a low dose of 0.6 mg/kg in adult female rats.” He also states, asafetida (*Ferula assa foetida*) has been employed “in human tests in 1963 as a contraceptive agent as well as an abortifacient” (p. 28). Cf. also J. M. Riddle and J. Worth Estes, “Oral Contraceptives in Ancient and Medieval Times,” *American Scientist* 80 (1992): 226–33.

7. Dioscorides *De materia medica* 3.80, Soranus *Gyn.* 1.63, Columella *De arboribus* 23.1, Pliny *NH* 19.38, *Isid. Orig.* 17.27; cf. Fordyce, *Catullus*, pp. 108–9; Riddle, *Contraception*, pp. 26–45.