

NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

LESBIA IN CATULLUS 35

At the end of Poem 35 Catullus addresses Caecilius' girlfriend as *Sapphica puella / musa doctior* (16–17). Scholars have interpreted the cryptic *Sapphica musa* in two ways. Either *Sapphica* stands for *Sappho*, or *musa* stands for *carmina*.¹ While “Girl, more learned than Sappho the Muse” would be intelligible, since Sappho was often cited as the tenth Muse,² the problem is equating *Sapphica* with *Sappho*. Adjectives in *-icus*, like the Greek *-ικος*, signify “pertaining to,” and it is hard to see how “Muse pertaining to Sappho” could come to mean “Sappho the Muse.”³ Taking *musa* as *carmina* is easier,⁴ but “Girl more learned than Sapphic poetry” is again different from saying “more learned than Sappho,” which is how it has often been interpreted.⁵ The form of Poem 35 is a poetic epistle, sent from Catullus to Caecilius. As commentators have regularly noted, because the poem is addressed to the papyrus (*papyre*, 2), Catullus chooses to communicate with Caecilius indirectly and allusively. Not only does the surprising apostrophe to the *puella* continue this form of communication, but it is also placed at the end of the poem, where Catullus regularly places his punch line or moment of revelation. The identification of *Sapphica musa* is therefore crucial. I interpret “Sapphic Muse” as a reference to Catullus' Sapphic inspiration, Lesbia.⁶

G. Lieberg, investigating the tendency in Greek and Latin poetry to equate the object of one's desire with a god, argues convincingly that the name *Lesbia* was well chosen in this regard: Lesbia provides Catullus with much of his poetic material and he therefore links her name to Sappho, who became known in the context of erotic

1. See K. Quinn, *Catullus: The Poems*² (New York, 1973), 197, for a discussion of both options.

2. See especially *Anth. Pal.* 9.506.2 (ascribed to Plato) and *Anth. Pal.* 7.407.2–4 and 9–10 (Dioscorides).

3. On the formation and use of adjectives in *-icus/-ικος*, see M. Leumann, *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre*² (Munich, 1977), 336–37.

4. Cf., for example, Ovid's manner of referring to the poetry of Anacreon of Teos as *Teia Musa senis* (*Ov. Ars am.* 3.330 and *Tr.* 2.364).

5. See C. J. Fordyce, *Catullus* (Oxford, 1961), 178.

6. N. Holzberg (“Lesbia, the Poet, and the Two Faces of Sappho: ‘Womanufacture’ in Catullus,” *PCPS* 46 [2000]: 33) uses the phrase “Lesbia the Sapphic Muse” only to reject what he calls the *communis opinio* about the significance of the name of Catullus' *puella*. As far as I know, however, no one has equated *Sapphica musa* in Poem 35 with Lesbia. C. Martin (*Catullus* [New Haven, Conn., 1992], 55) describes the process of the idealization of Lesbia as “romanticizing her under the sign of the Sapphic Muse,” but what he means, as do the other scholars Holzberg cites, is that naming her Lesbia compliments her by identifying her with the *puella docta* par excellence, Sappho. Holzberg is right to note that there is no evidence within the corpus to suggest that Lesbia was a learned poet like Sappho. Nevertheless, the inspiration for the range of emotions expressed in his “Catullus and Lesbia” poems is certainly Sappho, as is most evident in both form and subject matter in Poems 11 and 51; cf. Holzberg, “Lesbia,” 34–35 and 38. Thus I argue that by naming his *puella* Lesbia, Catullus is acknowledging that she is his personal Muse for his poetic material, not that she is like Sappho. Similarly, the *puellae* I cite as parallels below—Lycoris, Delia, and Cynthia—are not like Apollo, but their names, linked to the god of poetry, are marked as the creative inspiration for the elegiac poets.

poetry as a mortal Muse.⁷ After Catullus, as Lieberg further observes, the *puella* of elegy is often described as taking the place of the Muses or Apollo in inspiring the poet.⁸ Martial says that Cynthia made Propertius a poet, Lycoris was Gallus' inspiration (*ingenium*), and Lesbia dictated (*dictavit*) Catullus' poetry to him (Mart. 8.73.5–6 and 8). Propertius specifically states that his inspiration (*ingenium*) comes not from Calliope or Apollo, but from his *puella* alone (Prop. 2.1.3–4).⁹

While the elegiac poets may claim that their *puellae* provide them with their poetic material, many of them, like Catullus, choose names that, whatever other resonances they may have, are linked to more traditional sources of inspiration.¹⁰ Gallus' Lycoris, Tibullus' Delia, and Propertius' Cynthia all recall cult names for Apollo.¹¹ Varro of Atax, Catullus' contemporary, interestingly gives his *puella* the name Leucadia, which has ties to both Apollo and Sappho: Apollo had a temple on the island of Leucas and Sappho allegedly jumped from the Leucadian cliff in an attempt to overcome her love.¹² It appears then that Catullus' generation set the precedent for naming the beloved of elegy for a god or person associated with poetry. All of these names, moreover, are formed the same way, by turning an adjectival epithet or geographical marker into a proper noun. If we consider Lycoris, Delia, and Cynthia as "Apolline," in that their names pertain to Apollo, it follows that Catullus' Lesbia is Sapphic. *Sapphica musa*, therefore, meaning "poetic inspiration pertaining to Sappho," is clever periphrasis for *Lesbia*.

This identification is in keeping with the periphrastic form of communication sustained throughout the poem. Catullus begins by instructing his papyrus to tell Caecilius to come to Verona to learn some news of a mutual friend (35.1–6). Caecilius should come with all haste, Catullus announces to the papyrus, even if he has a girlfriend imploring him to stay (7–10). This hypothetical girlfriend (*quamvis candida milies puella / euntem revocet*, "although a fair girl may call him back / a thousand times as he's going," 8–9) becomes a reality (*quae nunc . . . / illum deperit*

7. G. Lieberg, *Puella Divina* (Amsterdam, 1962), 85–89 and 92–95. Elsewhere in his collection, Catullus refers to Muses in two distinct ways: as the actual Muses, the divine daughters of Memory (1.9, 68.41, and 105.2), and more generically as a metaphor for poetic inspiration (65.1–3 and 68.7–10); see S. Goga, "Catulle et les Muses," in *Hommages à Carl Deroux I—Poésie*, ed. P. Defosse (Brussels, 2002), 237–45.

8. Lieberg, *Puella Divina* (n. 7 above), 89–92; cf. also D. O. Ross, *Backgrounds to Augustan Poetry* (Cambridge, 1975), 115–18.

9. See E. Delbey, "Existe-t-il une Muse élégiaque?" *Noesis* 4 (2000): 189; cf. also Tib. 2.5.111–12, Prop. 2.30.40, and Ov. *Am.* 2.17.34 and 3.12.16, for the notion that the *puella* provides or sustains the poet's *ingenium*.

10. Goga ("Catulle et les Muses" [n. 7 above], 244) argues that it is not Lesbia, but the emotion and tension provoked by Lesbia that provides Catullus with his poetic material. Goga is making the more general argument against Lieberg, *Puella Divina*, 85–95, that Catullus does not bestow upon Lesbia the status of Muse. But recent scholarship would argue, as Goga later also concludes (p. 245), that the emotion and tension in Catullus is a poetic construct as is Lesbia herself, however real his "historical" affair might have been. Therefore, she—the poetic construct—is what inspires this mimesis of emotion and tension; cf. W. Fitzgerald, *Catullan Provocations: Lyric Poetry and the Drama of Position* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995), 134–39. As we see with the elegists, poets continue to speak about inspiration, divine or otherwise, even as poetic artifice inspired by the poet's intellect alone becomes more pronounced. For this "intellectualization" of inspiration as early as the Hellenistic period, particularly for the transformation of the Muses from goddesses of oral poetry to a written metaphor, see P. Bing, *The Well-Read Muse: Present and Past in Callimachus and the Hellenistic Poets* (Göttingen, 1988), 10–48.

11. See J. G. Randall, "Mistresses' Pseudonyms in Latin Elegy," *LCM* 4 (1979): 30–31 and 33. Particularly with reference to the name "Cynthia" as part of an established literary convention, see J. P. Sullivan, *Propertius: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, 1976), 78–79, and M. Wyke, *The Roman Mistress* (Oxford, 2002), 27–28.

12. See P. Knox, *Ovid "Heroides"* (Cambridge, 1995), 278 and 306–7.

impotente amore, “She now . . . / dies for him in hopeless love,” 11–12), as Catullus makes a transition from addressing the papyrus to the *puella*. Catullus then explains, purportedly still to the papyrus, that the girlfriend became smitten after reading the poem that Caecilius has begun on Cybele (13–15). The last three lines contain the apostrophe to the *puella*, where Catullus says he does not blame her for her reactions because the *Magna Mater* has begun *venuste* indeed (16–18). Since in reality the recipient of this epistle is not a papyrus or a *puella*, but Caecilius himself, the question then becomes what the message behind all of this indirect communication is. Critics have tended to focus on what Catullus is saying about Caecilius and his unfinished poem.¹³ By identifying *Sapphica musa* as Lesbia, however, I am more interested in what he is saying about himself: *ignosco tibi, Sapphica puella musa doctior* (“I don’t blame you, girl more learned than (my) Sapphic Muse,” 16–17). Behind the explicitly described relationship between Caecilius and his *puella* is Catullus’ relationship with Lesbia, to whom the *puella* here is being compared.¹⁴

Caecilius’ girlfriend is in love with the poet and his poetry. This is a poet’s dream, as Propertius later will also express it (Prop. 2.13.11–12):

me iuvat in gremio doctae legisse puellae,
auribus et puris scripta probasse mea.

It would delight me to have read aloud in my learned girl’s lap
and for her to have given assent to my work with her pure ears.

Catullus questions Lesbia’s appreciation of him throughout his corpus, but in Poem 36 he particularly criticizes her disregard for his poetry. Unlike Caecilius’ *puella* in 35, the Lesbia of 36, whom Catullus calls *pessima puella* (36.9), jokes that she will burn the best works of the worst poet (*electissima pessimi poetae / scripta*, 6–7); Catullus chooses to take this to mean the work of Volusius, but he admits that she had meant his own (1–10). Several scholars have noted the similarity in theme between Poems 35 and 36 and have argued that they were paired together intentionally, either by Catullus or by a later editor.¹⁵ The identification of *Sapphica musa* as Lesbia supports this view.

13. Scholars have been quite divided on whether Catullus is criticizing Caecilius for not finishing his poem on Cybele or complimenting him for having begun a poem that had such an emotional influence on his *puella docta*. For the view that the epistle is critical of Caecilius, see F. Copley, “Catullus 35,” *AJP* 74 (1953): 149–60; J. M. Fisher, “Catullus 35,” *CP* 66 (1971): 1–5; R. Heine, “Zu Catull c. 35,” in *Catull*, ed. R. Heine (Darmstadt, 1975), 62–84; and J. Basto, “Caecilius, Attis, and Catullus 35,” *LCM* 7 (1982): 30–34. For the view that it is complimentary, see H. Akbar Khan, “Catullus 35 and the Things Poetry Can Do to You!” *Hermes* 102 (1974): 475–90; S. Onetti and G. Maurach, “Catullus 35,” *Gymnasium* 81 (1974): 481–85; V. Buchheit, “Dichtertum und Lebensform in Catull c. 35/36,” in *Lebendige Romana: Festschrift für Hans-Wilhelm Klein*, ed. A. Barrea-Vidal, E. Ruhe, and P. Schunck (Göppingen, 1976), 47–59; H. Syndikus, *Catull: Eine Interpretation*, vol. 1 (Darmstadt, 1984), 199–205; E. A. Fredricksmeier, “Catullus to Caecilius on Good Poetry,” *AJP* 106 (1985): 213–21; and J. Solodow, “Forms of Literary Criticism in Catullus: Poly-metric vs. Epigram,” *CP* 84 (1989): 312–15. G. Biondi (“Il carme 35 di Catullo,” *MD* 41 [1998]: 35–69) supported by V. Hunnink (“‘Some Thoughts of a Friend’: Catul. 35.5–6,” *MD* 45 [2000]: 133–36) makes the novel suggestion that the poem on Cybele is not Caecilius’, but Catullus’ Poem 63, of which Caecilius has claimed ownership to impress his girlfriend.

14. D. O. Ross (“Style and Content in Catullus 45,” *CP* 70 [1965]: 256–59) has argued similarly that one is invited to think of Catullus’ relationship with Lesbia as he describes the love affair between Septimius and Acme in Poem 45; see also R. Newton, “Acme and Septimius Recounted: Catullus 45,” *Syllecta Classica* 7 (1996): 99–105.

15. See, for example, Buchheit, “Dichtertum und Lebensform” (n. 13 above), 60–64, and P. Y. Forsyth, “The Lady and the Poem: Catullus 35–42,” *CJ* 80 (1984): 24–25.

Indeed, 35 and 36 read like the elegiac diptychs of Propertius and Ovid, where the second of two consecutive poems reveals information that was not disclosed directly in the first.¹⁶ The suspicion that Caecilius' appreciative and learned *puella* is being compared to Lesbia by means of the periphrastic *Sapphica musa* is confirmed by 36, whose beginning spotlights Lesbia as unappreciative of Catullus the poet.

Catullus' commentary on others in Poem 35 is in the end a commentary on his own persona, as is so often the case in his corpus.¹⁷ Recent scholarship has focused on Poem 10 in this regard.¹⁸ Catullus begins and ends the poem by criticizing Varus' girlfriend (*scortillum, ut mihi tum repente visum est*, 3, and *sed tu insulsa male et molesta vivis*, 33), but makes us also question his judgments when he shows himself caught in a lie (10.16–23). Varus and his girlfriend appear happy together, while Catullus is seen to be lying and alone. In Poem 35 Catullus is in a similar position of isolation as he attempts to get Caecilius to join him, while Caecilius and his *puella* appear to be having a splendid time together. Poem 6, I believe, offers an even better comparison to 35.

The focus on Poem 6 has been Catullus' witty artistry. He takes something as base as a friend's sordid love affair with a prostitute (*illepidae atque inelegantes*, 2, and *nescio quid febriculosi / scorti*, 4–5) and transforms it into a graceful and clever poem (*volo te ac tuos amores / ad caelum lepido vocare versu*, 16–17).¹⁹ Part of its successful humor, I would suggest, is at the poet's expense. From the beginning, Catullus assumes the mock-serious tone of a concerned friend: Flavius is in denial, hiding the fact that he is sleeping with an unattractive hooker (1–5); nevertheless, Catullus' keen sense of intuition has uncovered his secret (6–14); therefore, Flavius should let Catullus help by telling him all about it (15–17). But does Flavius need any help? That his lover is a prostitute of whom he is ashamed is pure speculation (*ni sint illepidae atque inelegantes, velles dicere*, 2–3). Another possibility is that Flavius is too busy having a good time to discuss it with a friend. He is having sex while Catullus is sitting alone only writing about it.²⁰ As in Poem 10, then, while Catullus is commenting upon a couple, he humorously reveals something about himself in isolation.

In Poem 6, Catullus strikes the pose of a concerned friend who wants to help. He is critical of Flavius' secrecy, but this criticism, it is implied, would disappear if Flavius should only include him in his personal affairs.²¹ It has been argued that Catullus

16. See J. T. Davis, *Dramatic Pairings in the Elegies of Propertius and Ovid* (Bern and Stuttgart, 1977), esp. 13–25. Davis treats the following as quasi-dramatic diptychs: Prop. 1.8a–b, 11–12, 28a–b, and 29a–b, and Ov. Am. 1.11–12, 2.2–3, 7–8, and 13–14.

17. For the term "persona" in discussing the "I" specifically within Catullus' corpus, see C. Nappa, *Aspects of Catullus' Social Fiction* (Frankfurt am Main, 2001), 18–23; and D. Wray, *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood* (Cambridge, 2001), 161–67.

18. See M. Skinner, "Ut decuit cinaediorum: Power, Gender, and Urbanity in Catullus 10," *Helios* 16 (1989): 7–23; Fitzgerald, *Catullan Provocations* (n. 10 above), 169–79; and Nappa, *Catullus' Social Fiction* (n. 17 above), 85–93. See also most recently R. Bernek, "Catull c. 10—Tragikomödie eines Aufschneiders Intertextuelle Verbindungen zwischen Catull und der (römischen) Komödie," in *Enkyklion kepon (Rundgärtchen)*, ed. M. Janka (Leipzig, 2004), 81–100, who convincingly links Catullus' persona in Poem 10 to the *miles gloriosus* of comedy.

19. See M. Skinner, "Semiotics and Poetics in Catullus 6," *LCM* 8 (1983): 141–42; and R. Nielsen, "C. 6: On the Significance of Too Much Love," *Latomus* 43 (1984): 104–10.

20. I think this epiphany would have been especially humorous to a Roman audience whose ancestors took pride in action, not words; cf. Sall. *Cat.* 8.5: *optimus quisque facere quam dicere . . . malebat*.

21. Compare also Poem 55, where Catullus seeks for Camerius in vain and urges him to come out into the open with his secrets. Like Flavius, Catullus accuses Camerius of spending his time with a prostitute (55.10–11). See Martin, *Catullus* (n. 6 above), 132–34.

exhibits similar criticism of and concern for Caecilius in Poem 35. Caecilius is soft (*tener*, 1)²² and his poem is not finished (*incohata* / *Dindymi dominam*, 13–14, and *Magna . . . incohata Mater*, 18). The fact that his poem has begun *venuste* (17) is also not a good sign: Venus and Cybele do not mix,²³ and thus his *Magna Mater* will remain unfinished as long as he engages in his love affair. Leaving his *puella* and coming to Verona will somehow make everything better (5–7):

nam quasdam volo cogitationes
amici accipiat sui meique.
quare, si sapiet, viam vorabit

For I want him to hear some thoughts
of a friend of his and mine.
So if he's smart he'll eat up the road

Whether *amici . . . sui meique* is an oblique reference to Catullus himself or to a third party,²⁴ its very obliqueness is designed to pique Caecilius' interest, indicating that it is an excuse that has been fabricated to get him to Verona.²⁵ Catullus has put himself in an authoritative position to help, but, as was the case with Flavius in Poem 6, Caecilius seems to be doing just fine. Catullus' detailed focus on the *puella* in the second half of the poem not only implies this, but also points to who really needs help: Catullus, whose *Sapphica musa* is not reacting to the poet or his poetry as Caecilius' *puella* is. In a clever, humorous, and even slightly self-effacing manner, Catullus hints that Caecilius should leave his paradise simply because he is having more fun than Catullus is.

At the end of Poem 22, after Catullus has criticized Suffenus at length for not knowing how bad and pompous his poetry is, he stops short and comes to the realization that everyone is a Suffenus in some way (18–20). We all have flaws, but cannot perceive them when they are our own (20–21):

suus cuique attributus est error;
sed non videmus manticae quod in tergo est.

Everyone has their own failing,
but we don't see the sack that's on our back.

22. On *tener* see Heine, "Zu Catull c. 35" (n. 13 above), 65–69 and 78. Although many commentaries, such as D. F. S. Thomson, *Catullus* (Toronto, 1997), 293, and D. H. Garrison, *The Student's Catullus*³ (Norman, Okla., 2004), 112, continue to state that *poetae tenero* (35.1) means "love poet," there are no positive attestations for this meaning until Ovid (cf. *Am* 2.1.4 and 3.8.2, *Ars am.* 3.333, and *Rem. am.* 757). Heine shows that *tener* outside of Catullus often has a negative connotation, especially applied to people, and that this connotation holds within Catullus' corpus as well: at 62.51 and 67.21 it is used in the context of neglect or impotence, and in Poem 63, Catullus' Cybele poem, it is applied to the castrated Attis (10 and 88). Heine (pp. 77–80) and Basto ("Caecilius" [n. 13 above], 32) suggest that Catullus uses *tener* as a way, perhaps in jest, to warn Caecilius not to end up like Attis in his inactivity and devotion to his *puella*.

23. Many scholars have noted the striking juxtaposition of *venuste* and *Magna . . . incohata Mater*; cf. Heine, "Zu Catull c. 35," 81–83, and Buchheit, "Dichtertum und Lebensform," 52, for two different views. Biondi ("Il carme 35" [n. 13 above], 63) suggests that the juxtaposition is meant to recall Poem 63.17 (*et corpus evirastis Veneris nimio odio*), and that while Attis and his fellow initiates are emasculated from their excessive hate of Venus, Caecilius, it is implied, will become emasculated from his excessive pursuit of Venus (i.e., trying to impress the *puella*).

24. For the former interpretation see E. Adler, *Catullan Self-Revelation* (New York, 1981), 195; for the latter see Akbar Khan, "Catullus 35" (n. 13 above), 478–79.

25. Cf. Manius' strategy to get Catullus to leave Verona in Poem 68.27–29, and the interpretations of J. G. F. Powell, "Two Notes on Catullus," *CQ* 40 (1990): 202–6, and M. Skinner, *Catullus in Verona* (Columbus, 2003), 146–52.

Even though he uses the first-person plural here, most scholars have focused on Catullus' criticism of others. However, part of the charm of his poetry is his subtle ability to show himself missing the sack on his own back. Catullus' presentation of himself in Poem 35 and elsewhere—critical of others yet ultimately self-revealing—presages the first-person *persona* of elegy.²⁶

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26. See similarly Nappa, *Catullus' Social Fiction*, 23–24 and 26–32. I thank Rex Stem and the referee of this paper for their comments and suggestions.