

A Homeric Formula in Catullus (c. 51.11–12 *gemina teguntur lumina nocte*)*

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Few classical texts have been studied as much as Catullus 51, yet this little poem is still puzzling in many respects. This paper examines a minor problem as a starting-point for reconsidering some important questions.

It is well known that the first three strophes of *c.* 51 translate a famous fragment (31 Voigt) of Sappho describing the physical effects of a love-passion. The list of symptoms ends with two sentences concerning ears and eyes (lines 10–12):

sonitu suopte
tintinant aures, *gemina teguntur*
lumina nocte.

My ears ring with inward humming, my eyes are covered by a
twofold night.

As meter shows, *gemina* agrees with *nocte* rather than with *lumina*. Such a transferred epithet is unparalleled in Catullus, who elsewhere¹ employs enallage in its common form, namely the agreement of an adjective with a substantive governing a genitive to which the adjective logically refers.² In past times, this transfer seemed an oddity: transferred epithets are exceptional even in later Latin. Nevertheless, they do exist³ and especially in *c.* 51.11 such a transfer is

*I am greatly indebted to the editors, Marilyn B. Skinner and Cynthia Damon, and to the anonymous readers, for improvements and suggestions.

¹See the list of passages in Kroll 93.

²Although the ancient usage was different, modern scholars limit the notion of enallage (or hypallage) to this figure of speech: see Bers 1–20, 70–71. The distinction is sometimes overlooked (e.g., by Hofmann-Szantyr 160); however, it is appropriate here, in order to point out the anomaly of *c.* 51.11–12.

³On this basis the transmitted text was already successfully defended by Friedrich 236–37.

perfectly natural, since everything concerning both eyes can be considered as twofold in its turn. So, the problem should not be exaggerated: we are not entitled to remove the transfer by attributing to *geminā* unnatural and ill-documented meanings⁴ or altering the text.

We can also observe that the proposed emendations do not improve the text: *geminā integuntur* (Lambinus), *geminā obteguntur* (Schwabe) and *geminā et* (Spengel) resort to unjustified metrical fillers. Schrader's *aures geminae* is sometimes recommended even nowadays,⁵ but seems even worse—an evident syntactic triviality.⁶ All things considered, the only conjecture not obviously implausible is Baehrens' *gelida*. Nevertheless, this should be rejected too, not simply because any emendation is unnecessary, but, as we will see below, because positive arguments prove that the transmitted text is sound.

Metrical convenience does not suffice to explain why Catullus resorted to a transferred epithet. Such a skilful poet was surely able to avoid a figure of speech if he did not consider it suitable and effective, especially as his model, which is rendered very freely here, did not force him to use it. The freedom of lines 11–12 is also another puzzle.

Generations of scholars have pointed out that many differences exist between Sappho's fragment and Catullus' poem. Some of them are inherent in the usage of the different languages; others are due to poetical taste. But Sappho's fragment as a whole has been translated very faithfully, and when Catullus modifies his model more deeply his purpose is always clear. So, soon after the beginning, the exaggeration contained in line 2 gives the poet's audience an interpretative hint. They should expect that the model, famous in antiquity for its simple style, will be translated with an extraordinarily emphatic tone. In the next stanza (line 7), the insertion of *Lesbia*⁷ prepares for the change of interlocutor in

⁴Bickel 195–96 (followed by Wormell 192 and Ferguson 149) maintains that *geminus* here simply suggests the intensity of the darkness.

⁵E.g., by Fordyce 220–21 and Goold 55.

⁶Of course, meter does not support any opinion. We can indifferently suppose that in the third stanza Catullus either put a syntactic pause consistently after the fifth syllable of each hendecasyllable (Baehrens 259) or avoided such a repetition (Fordyce 221, after Haupt).

⁷Such an address has no correspondence in Sappho's verses. As a Florentine papyrus has shown (Manfredi 16–17), despite many conjectures Sappho 31.16 did not contain the name of any pupil of hers.

the last stanza.⁸ *Misero quod omnis eripit sensus mihi* (lines 5–6) was criticised as a weak translation of τό μ' ἦ μὰν καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν (Sappho 31.5–6),⁹ but it has since been recognized that Catullus shapes this sentence into a title for the list of symptoms that follows.¹⁰

Even in strophe 1, where the conspicuous insertions we have just mentioned forced the poet to abridge the translation in order to retain the same distribution of the matter as in the model, Catullus finds a way of following his model very closely through a refined play of numerical allusions. In line 4, the perception of the man is expressed by two verbs, *spectat et audit*, instead of one as in Sappho (31.4 ὑπακούει). On the contrary the two actions of the woman (Sappho 31.4–5 ἄδυ φωνέισας ... καὶ γελαίσας ἱμέροεν) are condensed into one phrase (line 5 *dulce ridentem*), blending the internal accusative of the first action with the verb of the second one. These sophisticated allusions, resembling the plays made by Apollonius of Rhodes with Homeric *hapax* and *dis legomena*,¹¹ prove, if proof is necessary, that a skilful and practiced poet wrote c. 51.

In this context, lines 10–12 are even more astonishing. In comparison with the model, the list inverts the last two symptoms (Sappho mentioned the eyes first). This fact has been universally noticed, but never adequately explained.¹² A verbal analysis also shows how freely Catullus translated Sappho here: *sonitu suoapte tintinant aures* (lines 10–11) amplifies Sappho's ἐπιρρόμβεισι δ' ἄκουαι (31.11–12), but above all ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημι(ι) (31.11) is far from being translated literally by Catullus' very elaborate sentence.¹³ This shows that the transferred epithet *gemina* is part of a more general problem.

Let us revert to the initial question. If *gemina ...nocte* finds no parallels in earlier or contemporary Latin literature, it seems reasonable to look for them in Greek literature, where enallage is much more common. First, C. J. Fordyce,

⁸This remark presupposes, of course, that the *otium* stanza belongs to c. 51. As we will see, the discussion of *gemina ... nocte* also throws further light on this vexed question.

⁹Cf. Ellis 139. In a similar way Ellis also implicitly condemned lines 11–12, praising as “strong” the corresponding sentence in Sappho. On the contrary, Kranz 237 found Catullus' expression “überstark.”

¹⁰Syndikus 1: 255.

¹¹On this subject see Rengakos 173–75 (with bibliography).

¹²In his structural analysis Copley 34–35 argues for a reversed correspondence between lines 10–12 and *spectat et audit* (line 4). This can be right (although Copley's analysis is questionable in some points), but does not answer the question, especially as *spectat et audit*, as we have seen, is also a Catullan invention.

¹³This contrasts with the succinct rendering at Lucretius 3.156 *caligare oculos*.

though preferring to emend the text, suggested that “an Alexandrian conceit” could have influenced Catullus.¹⁴ This suggestion is promising, but unfortunately Alexandrian literature, as far as it is known, does not confirm it. C. Pavese tried a less vague reference.¹⁵ He drew attention to an ancient scholium to Aeschylus *Th.* 782:

δίδυμα δὲ κακὰ ἔφη τὸ τῶν δύο ὀφθαλμῶν στερηθῆναι· ἓν γὰρ κακὸν τὸ ἐνὸς στερηθῆναι, δύο δὲ ἀμφοτέρων.¹⁶

He called being deprived of both eyes “twin evils”: in fact it is a single evil to be deprived of one eye, and two evils to be deprived of both.

Doubtless an interesting reference—but not entirely convincing. The scholiast does not explain *δίδυμα* as a transferred epithet, so we have no clear trace of the school exegesis that could have inspired Catullus. Secondly, the above interpretation of the Aeschylean passage is not the only one proposed by ancient commentators¹⁷ and consequently we do not know how Catullus could have understood the adjective.

Anyway, *gemina teguntur lumina nocte* is paralleled very closely by so famous a text that there is no reason to suppose that either literary or sub-literary mediations exist, although this possibility cannot be entirely ruled out. I refer to a well-known Homeric formula (*Il.* 5.310 = 11.356):

ἀμφὶ δὲ ὅσσε κελαινὴ νύξ ἐκάλυψε.

A dark night on both sides covered both eyes.

The resemblance is striking. The formula has been translated by Catullus as exactly as the opening of Sappho’s fragment. Evidently an indeterminate epicism did not satisfy Catullus’ taste, and he wanted his model to be clearly recognizable among other similar formulas.¹⁸ A brief examination explains how

¹⁴Fordyce 221.

¹⁵Pavese 117–18.

¹⁶Σ Aesch. *Th.* 778–84a (335 Langwitz Smyth). The same exegesis is also to be found in Σ 782a and 782c (337 Langwitz Smyth).

¹⁷Others understand *δίδυμα κακὰ* as two different accidents, blindness and curse: Σ Aesch. *Th.* 782d: τὴν τύφλωσιν καὶ τὴν ἀράν. (This has recently been followed by Hutchinson xxv, while West 117 favors parricide and incest.)

¹⁸It should be remembered that early epic poetry uses other similar formulas, like *Il.* 5.659 τὸν δὲ κατ’ ὀφθαλμῶν ἐρεβεννὴ νύξ ἐκάλυψε or *Il.* 16.350 (= *Od.* 4.180) θανάτου δὲ μέλαν νέφος ἀμφεκάλυπεν and *Il.* 5.68 θάνατος δὲ μιν ἀμφεκάλυψε, besides widespread τὸν / τὴν δὲ σκότος ὅσσε κάλυψε.

Homer could have suggested to Catullus the transfer of *gemina* from *lumina* to *nocte*, although no enallage occurs in the Homeric line. νύξ ἐκάλυψε is paralleled by *teguntur ... nocte*. *Gemina* seems to render the dual ὄσσε,¹⁹ but in fact translates exactly the notion expressed by ἀμφί,²⁰ and at the same time makes the sentence as balanced as the Homeric model, where only νύξ, not ὄσσε, is modified by an adjective (κελαινή).

Catullus as a translator likes to play with partly exact and partly illusory correspondences. A good example is given by the opening of the *Lock of Berenike*:

πάντα τὸν ἐν γραμμαῖσιν ἰδὼν ὄρον ἧ τε φέρονται (fr.
110.1 Pf. “having seen all the sky in maps, and where [they]
move”)

omnia qui magni dispexit lumina mundi (c. 66.1 “he who saw all
the lights of the universe”)

Although, as Vergil shows (*Ecl.* 3.41 *descripsit radio totum qui gentibus orbem* “who with a rod described all the sky to mankind”), a close translation was easy to obtain, Catullus translates Callimachus’ opening quite loosely—an unconventional choice. Nevertheless, c. 66.1 is immediately recognizable as a rendering of the Callimachean line, even before comparing their respective meanings, since the first words, *omnia* and πάντα, match each other. This correspondence now seems to be greater than it actually is. *Omnia* indeed translates πάντα and both adjectives have the same prominent position at the beginning of the line. However, they differ in gender and number—but this difference is skilfully disguised and can escape the reader at first glance.

Finally, reverting to Homer and c. 51, I would like to point out that the sophisticated play on correspondences is only allowed by the transfer of *gemina*. Therefore the transmitted text is sound and the doubts raised on this subject definitively prove to be unjustified.



¹⁹I do not think that the eluded expectation is *aurēs geminae* (Fowler 246, n. 38, which shows, in my opinion, how influential Schrader’s emendation still is). The Latin alphabet, lacking distinction between long and short vowels, helps other Catullan plays. E.g., Callimachus fr. 110.46 Pf. Μηδείων seems to be transliterated by c. 66.46 *medium*. In fact *per medium* translates διὰ μέσσου at the end of the preceding line in Callimachus’ elegy.

²⁰The Homeric passage is a typical example where ἀμφί is clearly different in meaning from περί: see Chantraine §120.

The use of language “which recalls a specific antecedent, but only in a general sense,” has been called “casual reference,”²¹ and as a rule every reference to Homeric formulas (i.e., not to a single episode, but to a repetitive element of epic diction) should be classified in this category. Here, however, the reference to Homer is much more than merely decorative and determines the meaning of *c.* 51.11–12. If we consider Catullus’ words without any intertextual reference, “my eyes are covered by a twofold night” can hardly equal a simple “I cannot see any more.” This restrictive meaning is usually accepted only because Catullus’ sentence is believed to translate Sappho’s ὀππάτεσσι δ’ οὐδ’ ἐν ὄρημ(ι). We can now see that a further literary model is echoed here and its interference frees us from this bias. Catullus seems to speak of blindness, like Sappho, and actually uses a euphemism for death, like Homer. The blending of true and illusory correspondences goes on.

This interpretation has some advantages, considerably affecting our general understanding of *c.* 51. As an obvious (albeit never explicitly drawn) consequence, it explains easily why neither *sonitu suoapte tintinant aures* nor any other symptom could follow *gemina teguntur lumina nocte*. To speak of deafness after evoking death would be illogical, or at least anticlimactic. So, the oxymoron *lumina nocte* brings the Catullan list of symptoms to an elegant end.

A further and even more important merit of this exegesis has already been pointed out. It has been observed that Sappho’s list, too, ends with a mention of death (31.15–16):

τεθνάκην δ’ ὀλίγω ’πιδεύης
φαίνομ’ ἔμ’ αὖτ[α]

It seems to me that I am little far from being dead.

This means that Catullus was able to recall the end of the fourth stanza of his main model without translating it. So, alluding to different lines of Sappho (31.11–12 and 15–16) with one intentionally ambiguous sentence, the poet implicitly summarizes all they contain. In other words, he has entirely rendered, by translation or by allusion, Sappho’s list.²²

This allows us to dismiss other attempts to explain why Catullus’ list is considerably shorter than Sappho’s. Since Catullus’ list is not incomplete, there is no objective reason to suppose the presence of a lacuna after *c.* 51.12—whether

²¹Thomas 1986: 175.

²²As seen by Vine 1992: 254, 257. Thomson 329 follows him, not without hesitations; unjustified hesitations, as the Homeric reference shows.

the gap divides fragments of two different poems²³ or all stanzas belong to the same ode.²⁴ On the other hand, the main alternative to this old hypothesis seems to be criticizable too: as we have seen, one cannot maintain any more that Catullus simply omitted Sappho's fourth stanza.²⁵ Moreover, nobody has convincingly explained what prevented Catullus from translating this stanza. That Sappho's fourth stanza seemed too passionate²⁶ to Catullus is a highly subjective, not to say hardly tenable assumption. It is not true even that a male poet could not translate this stanza.²⁷ The symptoms described there are not unlikely to be used of or by a man²⁸ and changing the gender of the feminine inflections in Sappho 31.13–16 would not be bolder than adding *misero* at line 5.

The presence of Homer in *c.* 51 deserves a final consideration. In some respects, it is entirely natural. Homericisms are the most widespread references in ancient poetry and occur quite often in Catullus, too.²⁹ Moreover the style of *c.* 51 is high enough to match epicisms, and Catullus could have been led by his model to employ them, since the language of Sappho's fragment itself has many Homeric features.³⁰ As far as conflation of references is concerned,³¹ this is a common practice for learned poets, including Catullus.³² Despite all this, the

²³A hypothesis, still quite popular now, first proposed by Statius (Estaço) 142.

²⁴This more recent and less popular alternative goes back to Rossbach x, 27.

²⁵Westphal 47–48.

²⁶Baehrens 259; Kranz 237; Schnelle 21; Elder 206.

²⁷Baehrens 260; Ferguson 149.

²⁸In Longus 1.17.1 χλωρότερον τὸ πρόσωπον ἦν πόας θερινῆς (“his face was paler than grass in summer”) is said of Daphnis.

²⁹Unfortunately we need a comprehensive study on this subject. The influence of Homer on Catullus was entirely ignored by Tolkiehn 142; Ronconi 37–39 limits himself to few instances drawn from *c.* 64; Luppino 165–70 aims simply to list some Homericisms neglected by commentators.

³⁰Parallels between Homer and Sappho 31 are collected by Voigt 58–59. The presence of Homeric echoes mediated by Sappho in *c.* 51 has been pointed to for a long time (see Vine 1993: 296–97).

³¹On this matter see Thomas 1986: 193–98.

³²The conflation of references in *c.* 64 has been exhaustively studied by Thomas 1982 esp. 154–60; see also Zetzel 257–61. For a less known instance (*c.* 58a.4 ~ *Il.* 10.437 and [Eur.] *Rh.* 30) see Granarolo 119 n. 1.

substitution of the model to translate in *c.* 51.11–12 undeniably comes somehow unexpected.³³

Such a surprise must have an adequate function. In my opinion, this is easier to be imagined if we accept that the *otium*-strophe belongs to the same poem as the first three stanzas. In this case, the Homeric reference points out that the poem, which up to this point seems like a translation, is indeed something else and prepares for the second section of the poem. On the contrary, if we consider *lumina nocte* as the “Schlußkolon”³⁴ of the whole poem, the Homeric reference would make it seem as an anomalous, eccentric translation and would serve simply as a device to shorten it: not impossible, but unattractive. All things considered, Homer makes it improbable, that the first three stanzas of *c.* 51 ever formed an independent poem.

This is a mere indication. Many other arguments should be considered; but this hoary question exceeds the limits of this paper. I hope to have shown how deeply a seemingly insignificant parallel improves the understanding of so famous a text, offering a stimulus to further research on it.

³³Catullus’ translation of Callimachus’ *Lock* shows (for instance, lines 79–88) some noteworthy differences from the Greek model as we know it, which can go back to a *contaminatio*. However, other explanations are usually preferred: see Syndikus 2: 201.

³⁴Bickel 196. It could be remembered that the old theory of the poem’s end at line 12 still finds some supporters (Wormell 192; Copley 33–37), and also that the conciliative hypothesis contemplating the addition of the last stanza at a later stage (Friedrich 237) has been reappraised not many years ago (Quinn 1970: 245 and 1972: 59).

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