Catullus: The Lesbia Cycle

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Is it better to have loved and lost than not to love at all? Catullus expresses another opinion: “Odi et amo” (I hate and I love).¹ In just four simple syllables, the late Roman Republic poet Catullus is able to convey the raw, inner turmoil that love and passion wreak upon him. Like many disillusioned people, Catullus hoped that love would make him whole in some way, but through his tumultuous relationship with Lesbia, he discovers that being in “love” only makes him insecure and obsessive. Throughout his lyric poetry, especially in his polymetra and epigrams, Catullus poignantly captures the insecurity that stems from the vicious cycle of falling in love, betrayal of foedus, and heartbreak.

While falling in love, the line between passion and obsession is often blurred. Catullus’ concept of love is similar to Plato’s theory “divine madness,” which presents love as an uncontrollable part of human nature. David Konstan details: “Amor was a spell of overriding passion, a fit of madness, and the

¹. Catullus, Epigramma 85
lover was regarded as the subject of temporary insanity.”² In Catullus’ case, he placed an incredible amount of value on Lesbia’s beauty, so much that he began to put Lesbia on a pedestal. Catullus finds Lesbia to be the most beautiful girl in the world: “Lesbia formosa est, quae cum pulcherrima tota est” (Lesbia is beautiful, not only is she all of these things and still the most beautiful. She is so attractive that she is, “Tum omnibus una omnis subripuit Veneres” (So much so that
she stole all the Venuses from all together).³ By comparing Lesbia to Venus, Catullus is using a standard of comparison that would have been considered very high, because Venus is the standard of beauty for the Romans.⁴ Catullus continues to construct this pedestal when Catullus asks for “da mi basia mille,” (give me a thousand kisses).⁵ At first, a thousand kisses may seem undyingly romantic, but Catullus wants to give Lesbia even more kisses: “deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum”(then immediately a thousand then a hundred). Is this basial affection coming from an outpouring of affection or an unhealthy attachment? It seems like Catullus is leaning more towards obsession and codepency. He calls Lesbia his “mea vita” (my life) and hopes that their love will be “perpetuum” (everlasting).⁶ Co-dependent people often subvert their own needs, which put them in the position of trying to receive love from a very difficult person”.⁷ Catullus is idealistic in his relationship with Lesbia, however, his obsession with her could easily turn their relationship unpleasant.

Catullus believes that each relationship has a contract of trust, a foedus. The person breaking the contract has more power in the now unbalanced relationship than the other, and the other person in the relationship is subjected to betrayal and confusion. Patrick McGushin explains foedus further: “the concept of married love as a foedus, a contract which depends for its validity and permanence on the observance by each partner...that is the essential ingredient of such a union.”⁸ Catullus writes: “aeternum hoc sanctae foedus amicitiae” (our whole life this eternal pact of holy friendship). Many themes of Catullus’ writing appear in this phrase. For instance, there is the mention of aeternum, or eternal. Forms of aeternum or perpetuum occur frequently throughout Catullus’ poems, which demonstrates the ongoing trust and faith that Catullus has in his relationship with Lesbia.⁹ He thinks that their foedus is holy and will never be broken.⁸ Also, the usage of amicitiae in this phrase indicates that their relationship right now, according to Catullus, is a balanced one. In true friendships,
there is a power balance, because friends do not need each other to "complete" each other's lives. Cicero supports this general sentiment from his essay *De Amicitiae*: “But here is another golden rule in friendship: put yourself on a level with your friend.”¹⁰ Relationships, on the other hand, lead to one person depending on another for a fulfilling life. In a clever, but painful analogy that Catullus makes between Lesbia's bird and himself, he reveals that, “*digitum dare appetenti/ et acris solet incitare morsus, / cum desiderio meo nitenti / carum nescio quid lubet iocari*” (she is accustomed to give the top of her finger, / And to provoke sharp bites, / Whenever it is pleasing for my shining sweetheart / To make some dear joke);” and this demonstrates the dangerous situation in which Lesbia takes advantage of and takes him for granted, like her bird.¹¹ The pain that Catullus feels is expressed here: “*nulla fides ullo fuit quam foedere tanta, / quanta in amore tuo ex parte reperta mea est*” (there was no treaty with as much trust / as was found in that of my love for you).¹² It is evident that Catullus trusted and loved Lesbia very much, thus his later pain stemmed from a relationship built upon a foundation of co-dependence and an uneven power dynamic because of the betrayal of their *foedus*.

Betrayal and heartbreak aside, was the relationship between Catullus and Lesbia truly love? Catullus is more self-aware of this issue in later poems. He bemoans: “*cum ventitābās quō puella ducēbat*” (when you would always come where the girl led).¹³ This sentence clearly demonstrates the power imbalance in their relationship. He always followed Lesbia, even though following “the girl” may not have been the happiest path for him. Many psychologists often say that relationships are built on compromise; therefore one-sided relationships are doomed to fail.¹⁴ There’s something so alluring about Lesbia that makes Catullus remind himself that what’s over is over, but he can’t stop thinking about her: “*Miser Catulle, dēsinās ineptīre, / et quod vidēs perīsse perditum dūcās*” (Wretched Catullus, stop being a fool, / and what you

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see has perished, consider perished). Typically in Catullus’
poetry, the word miser is seen in the phrase me miserum (o
wretched me),¹⁴ but perhaps Catullus uses the third person in
poem 8 to emotionally distance himself from the situation. It
helps to talk about one’s relationships through the lens that
one is a character instead of a real live person. The heartbreak
that comes from solely obsessing over love is the ultimate
destruction. This destruction or excruiciare, to torture, is
central to the themes of both poems 76 and 85. In poem 76,
he knows that Lesbia is ungrateful and asks himself, “quare
iam te cur amplius excrucies?” (So why do you keep torturing
yourself further?).¹⁵ Then in poem 85 he laments, “nescio, sed
fieri sentio et excrucior” (I do not know, but I feel it being done
and I am tormented).¹⁶ Notice the difference in the person of
the verbs. ‘Excrucies’ is in the second person, while ‘excrucior’
is in the first person. It is possible that by using the second
person, Catullus the poet, who strives to approach love ration-
nally, is scolding Catullus the character. When he later writes
odi et amo,¹⁷ he uses first person because both Catulluses have
finally accepted the torment of love.

The transition from third to second to first person is very
deliberate, and also reflects Catullus’ innermost thought
process and his transition to acceptance. Simply put, his
feelings towards Lesbia are ambivalent. While he hates and
loves at the same time and is tormented, it is better to have
loved than to not have loved at all because Catullus believes
that the grand purpose of life is to experience this relentless
cycle of love. Moreover, Catullus transformed the pain from
this cycle into art, which is attractive to humans because its
pain and sorrow are intimately relevant to personal experi-
ences.¹⁸ No one can reveal the richness of life as a whole, but
artists can unveil personal wisdom that they have gained from
their own life. For example, Catullus laments, “qui illius culpa
cecidit uelut prati / ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam / tactus
aratro est” (which, by her fault, like the flower at / the farthest
meadow, dies after it was touched by the plow / passing by).¹⁹

¹⁵. Catullus, Epigramma 76
¹⁶. Catullus, Epigramma
¹⁷. Catullus, Epigramma 85
¹⁸. Ted Gracyk, “Hume’s
Aesthetics,” Stanford
Encyclopedia of
¹⁹. Catullus, Polymetra 11
This is such a startling image of pain and loss that can only be comforted through artistic expression. Catullus’ pain from his relationship of falling in love with, being betrayed and heartbroken by Lesbia has been turned into poetry that expresses emotions that are timelessly transcendental.

**Works Cited**


