

EMBERS *of the* ANCIENT FLAME 2ND EDITION

LATIN LOVE POETRY SELECTIONS FROM
CATULLUS, HORACE, AND OVID

by
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CATULLUS

Gaius Valerius Catullus, as he is named by literary tradition, was probably born in Verona in about 84 bc, although some sources make that 87. His family was obviously wealthy, since they possessed villas in Sirmio (in the north) and Tivoli. His family's status is further confirmed by the fact that he had a social relationship with Julius Caesar and with the consul (or at least the consul's wife) Q. Metellus Celer, in about 60 bc. General literary commentary assumes that the "Lesbia" in Catullus' poems was Clodia, sister of P. Clodius Pulcher. Clodius was the enemy of Cicero and the center of much political and social comment of the period, as was his sister. A problem with this acknowledgement of Clodia as Lesbia lies in the fact that Clodia had two sisters, so either of them might be possibilities. We know from his own writings that he was in Bithynia, serving in the military under the leadership of Memmius, from 57 to 56 bc Jerome (*Chronica*) gives the death date of Catullus as 54. He was thirty then, according to Jerome's chronology, which made him a very young man during his entire creative career. That it was a brief career is widely accepted and lamented, and the cause of death is unknown; although since the nature of much of his poetry was very inflammatory and actually libelous by modern standards, one could reliably speculate that he disappeared under mysterious circumstances.



CATULLUS 2, 2B: NOTES

Meter: Hendecasyllabics

This poem is commonly called “The Sparrow,” since in its entirety it is a poetic *APOSTROPHE* to a “passer,” a small bird, possibly a blue thrush. Since among the classical community there is some discussion about the nature and function of this “passer,” the student is encouraged to read and make an independent decision. Catullus, ever the tortured lover, implies that this small “bird” is allowed an intimacy with Lesbia which Catullus himself is denied. Is the bird avian, inanimate, or human? Whichever one chooses, the *IRONY* is inescapable.

1. **passer, passeris, m.,** sparrow
2. **quicum = quocum (cum quo)**
sinu: from **sinus, -us, m.,** curve, fold, bosom, lap, pocket
3. **primum digitum:** literally, “foremost finger,” but its meaning is really idiomatic for “finger-tip”
appetenti: *pres. part. from appeto*, 3, seek, attack, try to reach
4. **solet:** requires a complementary infinitive. In this case, Catullus places the main verb (**solet**) at the end of a series of complementary infinitives.
morsus, -us, m., bite
5. **nitenti:** *pres. part. from niteo*, 2, shine, glitter, be sleek and plump; *either dat. or abl., depending upon one’s interpretation.*
6. **nescio quid:** sometimes written as one word; read with **carum** as acc. of specification: “to make I don’t know what dear joke.”
lubet = libet: impersonal verb + infinitive (*iocari*)
7. **solacium:** *dim. of solacium, -i, n.,* solace or comfort
8. **acquiescat: acquiesco (adquiesco),** 3, assent, subside, lie down to rest
ardor, ardoris, m., passion, fire, intensity, brightness
9. **sicut, adv.,** just as, as it were
10. **levare:** lift, relieve, lessen

Meter: Hendecasyllabics

This poem is a fragment of some larger work. The labeling conventions of literary classification place it here, since some scholars felt it may be a part of Poem 2, although it is not fundamentally linked to the preceding poem. The reference is to Atalanta, a woman from Greek mythology who vowed to marry any suitor who could defeat her in a foot race. Many tried and failed, but Hippomenes, at the suggestion of Venus, devised a clever plan: he threw three golden apples along the race course which the curious Atalanta stopped to collect during the race. The brief interlude gave him the chance he needed to gain the lead in the contest, and to defeat Atalanta, thus claiming her as his bride. The implication inherent in the story is that this loss was not odious to Atalanta.

2. **pernici: pernix, pernicis:** *adj.,* agile, fleet of foot
 3. **zonam: zona, -ae, f.,** a woman’s girdle or belt
solvit: solvo, 3, loosen, untie, cast off
- The reference to the loosening of a woman’s belt is an allusion to lost virginity.
ligatam: *p.p. of ligo*, 1, tied together, bound up



CATULLUS 2

Passer, deliciae meae puellae,
quicum ludere, quem in sinu tenere,
cui primum digitum dare appetenti
et acris solet incitare morsus,
cum desiderio meo nitenti 5
carum nescio quid lubet iocari,
et solaciolum sui doloris,
credo, ut tum gravis acquiescat ardor:
tecum ludere sicut ipsa possem
et tristis animi levare curas! 10

CATULLUS 2B

tam gratum est mihi quam ferunt puellae
pernici aureolum fuisse malum,
quod zonam soluit diu ligatam.



CATULLUS 5: NOTES

Meter: Hendecasyllabics

This poem has a companion in Horace's *Ode* 1.11 (*carpe diem*) and a theme much adored by poets of all time periods: Let us live and love with no regard to what people say; for life is short and when it is over, death is eternal and unsuited to passion. Catullus introduces a common theme that is prevalent throughout his poetry, the idea of creating a persona. The role that Lesbia plays in Catullus' poetry is symbolic and representative of a personality with whom Catullus' audience can identify. The student of Catullus must examine the poetry and its characters from both the perspective of its historical significance within the political and social tide of the time, and from the humanistic representations that the characters fulfill.

There is some argument, mostly due to a lack of complete textual or historical evidence, concerning the identity of Lesbia. Her name, according to Apuleius, is largely agreed to be a pseudonym for Clodia, the sister of P. Clodius Pulcher, a man known for scandal, sacrilege, and for his enmity toward Cicero. If she was, in fact, the wife of Quintus Metellus Celer, consul in 60 BC, interesting political and social conclusions can be drawn. Clodia, widely known for her affair with Caelius and eventual role in Cicero's famous defense of the same (*Pro Caelio*), is thought to have led a somewhat devious and suspect life, frequenting the company of young men.

1. **vivamus...amemus**: hortatory subjunctives
Notice the focus gained by the author's placement of **mea Lesbia**. These words capture the central theme of the poem, and, some argue, of his poetry in general: the poem and his mind always center on Lesbia. She is between "live" and "love."
2. **senum**: **senex**, **senis**, *m.*, old man
severiorum: *comp. of severus adj.*, strict, severe, forbidding. The use of this adjective hints at the social rift growing between the artfully inspired young aristocrats, such as Catullus, and the older, more established cadre of the republic's current leaders, such as M. Tullius Cicero, C. Julius Caesar, et al.
3. **unius**: *gen. of unus, -a, -um, adj.*; scan the *i* short
assis: **as**, **assis**, *m.*, a unit of money, comparable to a penny. Genitive of value with **aestimemus**
4. **soles**: *from sol, solis, m.*, sun
occidere: here, "sunset" with **redire**, *comp. infinitive with possunt*: "suns (are able to) set and return."
5. **semel**, *adv.*, once, once and for all, the first time
6. **dormienda**: passive periphrastic
7. **basia**: **basium, -i, n.**, kiss
mi = mihi
- 7-10: **deinde** and **dein** are used to accommodate metrical necessities in the poem. The **ANAPHORAS** created in lines 7-10 add to the **conturbabimus** in 11.
11. **conturbo**, 1, upset or disquiet; throw into disorder (particularly in regard to financial matters, as the word is often used by Cicero). The use of this verb hints at a deliberate act of deception by Catullus and Lesbia. It is used in the poem not in the sense of "keeping quiet about," but more for the purpose of "stirring things up" with their kisses.
12. **invidere**: look inward; hence, look upon with 'an evil eye' or be envious of
13. **sciat**: *subjunctive of scio*, 4, know