

The Influence of Contemporary Society and Politics on Catullus 51

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This paper explores the possibility of an undercurrent of sociopolitical commentary in Catullus's Poem 51. Taking as its starting point a recent theory arguing for such a commentary in Poem 11, it attempts to determine whether and to what extent it can be applied to Poem 51; these two poems are often studied together, as they both concern the character Lesbia and are the only two Catullan poems written in the sapphic meter. The paper examines elements of the poem such as word choice, meter, and stylistic devices, as well as differences between it and the Sappho poem it is based on. The argument is that there are elements of sociopolitical commentary in Poem 51 similar to Poem 11 and other 'Lesbia poems', albeit to a lesser extent.

Ille mi par esse deo videtur,
ille, si fas est, superare divos,
qui sedens adversus identidem te
spectat et audit

dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis
eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi
vocis in ore

lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus
flamma demanat, sonitu suo
tintinant aures, gemina teguntur
lumina nocte.

Otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est:
otio exsultas nimiumque gestis:
otium et reges prius et beatas
perdidit urbes.

He seems to me to be equal to a god,
he seems, if permissible, to surpass gods,
who, sitting opposite you, repeatedly
watches and hears you

sweetly laughing, a thing which robs poor me of
all my senses: for as soon as I see you,
Lesbia, there is nothing left over of
a voice in my mouth,

but my tongue is numb, a delicate flame drips
under my limbs, with their own sound my ears ring,
my eyes are both covered in the black darkness
of the double night.

Idleness, Catullus, is trouble for you:
idleness you boast and delight too much in:

idleness has earlier destroyed kings and
prosperous cities.¹

In his *Catullus: An Interpretation*, Kenneth Quinn asserts that the poet's relationship with Lesbia is the main literary achievement and focus of Catullus's poems.² He argues that we are meant to read the Lesbia poems and the non-Lesbia poems as distinct from each other. Recent scholarship in the field of Catullan studies, however, has explored the relationship between these two groups of poems. W. Jeffrey Tatum provides a summary of some recent contributions to this area of study.³ In addition to the more recent work he mentions, Paul Allen Miller, discussing Sappho's influence on Catullus, has observed that the culture of poetry Catullus found himself in allowed him to invite comparisons between readings of different poems, in a way that was not possible for Sappho in her strictly oral poetic context.⁴ One theory that I wish to explore further in this paper is that of David Konstan, who argues that themes of Catullan political invective can be found in certain Lesbia poems.⁵ For Konstan, Lesbia is one of the vehicles Catullus uses to make political commentary; in other words, Catullus's conception of his contemporary political context influences how he depicts Lesbia. This paper will attempt to determine the extent to which this theory of Lesbia can be extended to another of the Lesbia poems, namely poem 51. My hypothesis is that parallels can be found between this poem and aspects of other poems that Konstan finds themes of subtle and indirect political invective in. This paper will focus specifically on Catullus's word choice, meter, and other rhetorical devices such as elision, and in particular how these relate to similar words and rhetorical devices used in poem 11 and other relevant Catullan poems. Ultimately, it will determine that poem 51 does have characteristics of sociopolitical commentary similarly to other poems discussed by Konstan, albeit to a lesser extent. But the manner in which Catullus does this fits with what scholars generally consider to be the role of the poem within the broader narrative of the Lesbia poems.

Konstan focuses in particular on poem 11,⁶ which begins with a long excursus in which the speaker describes in detail the many faraway places his friends Furius and Aurelius are willing to go with him. The question of how this excursus is relevant to the poem's main theme – the delivery of a good-riddance message to Lesbia – has been the focus of much scholarly debate⁷; he offers the explanation that Catullus is drawing a parallel with the other instances, such as poem 29, where he describes morally corrupt politicians as excessively desirous of going on military campaigns in such faraway places for the sake of acquiring ever more plunder and territory. Furthermore, Lesbia herself represents the excessive masculine lust which is characteristic of corrupt male politicians: “In the penultimate stanza of c. 11, Catullus complains that Lesbia loves no one truly, but rather seizes and crushes her innumerable adulterous partners (*moechis*). ... She is an overly masculine woman, just as Caesar and Mamurra ... are represented as rapacious and yet feminized men: common to both extremes is sexual voracity.” The legitimacy of the connection between an attack on a person's

1 Catullus 51. This and all other translations in this paper are mine, unless otherwise noted as Goold's.

2 Quinn: 49-50.

3 Tatum. In particular, it is worth noting that Skinner 2003 argues that Catullus himself arranged his poems in the order we have today.

4 Miller 193.

5 Konstan. His main theory is that political invective themes can be detected in poems that are not directly related to politics (he discusses 28 and 29 as examples of invective poems that are clearly directly politically related). In the process, he discusses certain Lesbia poems, namely 11 and 58.

6 He also briefly discusses poem 58. His theory is that with the harsh verb *glubit*, Catullus portrays Lesbia as “peeling” away the moral characters of Roman men.

7 See, e.g., a summary of articles on the poem at Thomson 238-239.

sexual immorality and an implied attack on his politics can be supported by Tatum, who discusses how the Romans often drew such connections.⁸ He compares Catullan invective to Roman oratory, in which attacks on personal immorality were often used in political debates or in the courts. Cicero's *Second Philippic* is cited as an example, because in it Cicero attacks his political enemy Antony partly by criticizing his improper sexual relationship with a mime actress. The primary example discussed by Konstan is Mamurra, "a wealth protégé of Caesar in Spain and Gaul, and ... a notorious big spender."⁹

Konstan does not discuss every Lesbia poem, however. This opens up the possibility of extending his theory to other Lesbia poems. If Lesbia is used more than once as a symbol of the general moral corruption of the Roman ruling class, then it is conceivable that this same character could be used similarly in other poems. A logical example would be poem 51. A connection between the two poems would be far from a new theory, since many scholars have explored such a connection.¹⁰ There are obvious reasons for this. Firstly, they are both written in the Sapphic meter – and are the only two Catullan poems with this meter. Also, 51 and 11 are often described as the first and last poems of the Lesbia 'story', respectively. 51 deals with Catullus's initial infatuation with Lesbia; 11 is his bitter good riddance to her, and has a degree of finality not seen in any other Lesbia poem. Textual similarities have been observed; for example, Dyson notes that "the shared phrase 'over and over' (Latin *identidem*) emphasizes both the obsessiveness and the timelessness of the affair." These are the only two uses of *identidem* in the Catullan corpus; as Garrison notes, the use of an uncommon word is a common device used by Catullus to mark emphasis.¹¹ In short, there is plenty of scholarly background that suggests a parallel between poems 11 and 51. Thus, although Konstan does not discuss 51, it is interesting to consider if it can be included among the Lesbia poems that can be read as having an undercurrent of sociopolitical commentary.¹²

Much of Konstan's interpretation of poem 11 is based on Catullus's repeated use of far-away place names. It may be objected, therefore, that poem 51 cannot have the same kind of political commentary, since there are no such words. In fact, Lesbia and Catullus are the poem's only proper nouns. This point must be conceded; however, Konstan also argues that Lesbia's excessive lust, described in the later part of poem 11, is representative of other depictions of excessive Roman desire, whether sexual or otherwise. It has been demonstrated how a political attack made via an attack on the target's excessive sexual lust can be seen in Cicero. Furthermore, Konstan also argues that poem 58 is political commentary despite not having a similar program of place names of the kind seen in 11. In both poems, the subtle commentary is partly based on Lesbia's sexual excess, and this characteristic is what I will explore in poem 51.

It is perhaps best to start where Catullus himself started, by comparing his poem with Sappho's fragment 31, of which Catullus 51 is clearly an adaptation:

Φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν

8 Tatum.

9 Garrison 171.

10 E.g., Miller; Morgan 246; Dyson.

11 Garrison xx.

12 It must be made clear that neither Konstan nor I propose to replace or play down the interpretation of the Lesbia poems as the narrative of the speaker's relationship with Lesbia. This is the basic meaning of the poems; the political undercurrents are just that, and are worth exploring in order to develop our understanding of how Catullus's poems are influenced by his perception of the society he lived in. As Tatum says, "No longer simply a backdrop for the narrative of Catullus' romance, ... the poems' social commentary has emerged as a persistent and even essential element of the Catullan poetic program."

ἔμμεν' ὄνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδου φονεί-
σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·
ὡς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω βρόχε', ὡς με φώναί-
σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἴκει,

ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲν γλῶσσα <μ' > ἔαγε, λεπτόν
δ' αὐτίκα χρῶ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,
ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-
βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

καὶ δ' δὲ ἴδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐτά.

ἀλλὰ τὰν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ ἴκαὶ πένηταῖ[

That man seems to me the equal
of the gods, who sits face to face
with you and listens nearby to
your sweet voice

and lovely laughter, an experience which
makes the heart in my breast flutter;
for the moment I look at you, then I can
no longer speak,

but my tongue is paralysed, a subtle
flame has at once coursed beneath my skin,
with my eyes I see nothing, and my
ears are buzzing;

sweat pours down me, and trembling
seizes me all over, I am paler
than grass, and I seem to be on the
verge of dying.

But all must be endured, since...¹³

Catullus's poem is obviously a rather close translation of the Sappho poem. When there are differences, we may therefore consider such changes to be highly marked by Catullus for emphasis. This literary device in poem 11 is in fact discussed by Morgan, who makes the observation that that poem is itself an adaptation of Sappho fragment 105c.¹⁴ Sappho uses a plough-flower imagery similar to that found at the end of Catullus 11, but Catullus changes the sex roles: he portrays Lesbia as the *aratrum* (plough) and Catullus as the *flos* (flower). This is a reversal of the sex roles Sappho portrays with this image. Although Konstan does not mention this, this observation in fact

13 Tr. Goold 222.

14 Morgan 210. Cf. Miller 194.

strengthens his argument that Catullus marks Lesbia out as having ruinous masculine lust à la Mamurra. It also demonstrates the way in which Catullus makes a small but significant change to the Sappho poem he draws inspiration from. Consequently, it will be useful to look for similar differences between Catullus 51 and Sappho 31.

The most significant difference is that line 2 of Catullus's poem is not found at all in Sappho's poem. It is completely Catullus's creation. This is significant in the first place because of its prominent position within the poem – Catullus begins by saying that the object of his affection is equal to the gods, which is a direct translation of Sappho. He thus establishes that this is an adaptation of this particular Sapphic poem. But then he suddenly adds a new line: *ille, si fas est, superare divos*. The idea of being placed above the gods is paralleled with the theme of Mamurra's desire to go beyond what Catullus thinks of as his proper limits as a human.¹⁵ By describing Mamurra as a large penis who always desires to own more land, *usque ad Hyperboreos et mare ad Oceanum* (all the way to the Hyperboreans and the sea of Oceanus) in poem 115, argues Konstan, Catullus attacks Mamurra's excessive greed, using imagery of sexual lust. As noted above, Konstan draws a parallel between the specific place names used to describe this excess in 115 with those in 11 (*Indos ... Eoä ... Hyrcanos Arabasve ... Sagas ... Partbos ... Nilus ... Alpes ... Gallicum Rhenum ... Britannos*), as well as a parallel between the sexual voraciousness implied in the description of Mamurra as a *mentula magna* ("big cock") and in that of Lesbia as *simul complexa tenet trecentos* ("embracing three hundred adulterers at once").

A similar parallel can be seen between poems 115 and 51; this has to do with the use of the verb *superare*. Mamurra is described as *Croesum superare*, "superior to Croesus", because of his wealth. The man described with *ille*, presumably Lesbia's husband Celer, is described as *superare divos*. These are in fact Catullus's only two uses of the verb.¹⁶ Poem 51 contains the qualification *si fas est*, "if it is permissible." *Fas* is used for what is divinely sanctioned or permissible; the fact that Catullus has to add this qualification implies that humans are of course not permitted by the gods to be thought of as superior to the gods. Thomson argues that this use of *fas* means "nothing more than 'possible'", providing examples from Horace, Cicero, Propertius, Naevius, Gellius, and Ovid. But this does not prove that *fas* cannot mean "divinely permissible", only that there seem to be two primary meanings of it. This means that we must rely on context to determine which meaning is correct, and in this case it would be stretching it to argue that *fas* cannot refer to something sanctioned by the gods when that something is being considered superior to the gods. Also, Thomson does not mention Catullus's only other use of *fas*, which is found at 89.5: *qui ut nihil attingat, nisi quod fas tangere non est* ("Though he touch only what is forbidden him to touch").¹⁷ The context there is Catullus's suggestion that Gellius is guilty of incest; this is obviously something that is possible but not morally permissible. It is also relevant to a discussion of Catullus's portrayal of sexual immorality. The qualification *si fas est* can thus be interpreted as suggesting that it is in fact not permissible to be considered superior to the gods. This is the first indication that there is something morally wrong, even if only potentially so, with this romance. The significance of this careful word choice is further emphasized by Catullus's use of the prefix *super-* elsewhere to describe Mamurra, at 29.6: *superbus et superfluens* (which Goold translates as "overbearing and overwealthy"). This is another poem which, as Konstan argues, contains numerous references to distant locations in order to emphasize its point of Mamurra's lack of restraint.

15 Konstan. He is speaking in particular of poems 29 (lack of financial restraint) and 115 (lack of restraint in desiring new land from conquests).

16 McCarren 182.

17 Tr. Goold 205.

As mentioned earlier, Konstan argues that the portrayal of Lesbia as sexually violent, as represented by words such as *rumpens* (“tearing” or “ripping”), parallels the violence of Romans while on military expeditions away from Italy.¹⁸ The second change to Sappho’s poem 31 introduced by Catullus can be used to support this theory. Sappho 31.6 describes the speaker’s experience of hearing her beloved’s laugh as one that “makes the heart in my breast flutter.” In 51.5-6, Catullus writes: *misero quod omnes / eripit sensus mihi* (“which robs poor me of all my senses”). This change is not as obvious as that in line 2, which is a Catullan construction; but there are important differences in word choice. Sappho does not use a comparative Greek word for *misero*; this addition contributes to Catullus’s characterization of his own state as wretched or pitiable.¹⁹ On this addition, Thomson notes: “C. replaces *καὶ γελαιίσας ἡμέροεν*, ‘with your lovely laughter,’ by *dulce ridentem*, which is shorter; and the connective *καί*, which was required because of the preceding *ἄδου φονείσας ὑπακούει*, ‘listens to your sweet utterance,’ is omitted by C., who (moreover) condenses the last three words into *et audit*. All this makes room for the addition of *misero*.” This suggests the importance Catullus placed on making this addition. Similarly, *eripit* is not found in the Sapphic original. This is quite a violent word, with a meaning similar to the *rumpens* of 11.20. The primary meaning given in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* is “to seize, pull, tear, or pluck from a position, a person, his hands, body, etc., snatch out, away, or off.” If we accept the common theory that this poem is the first in the series of Lesbia poems²⁰, it is interesting to note that the two words are used together also at 76.19-20: *me miserum aspiciate et, si vitam puriter egi, / eripite hanc pestem perniciemque mihi* (“look on me in my misery, and, if I have led a pure life, / rid me of the plague and pestilence”).²¹ This *pestem perniciemque* is nothing other than the poet’s relationship with Lesbia; he is wishing to be rid of her. In this way, poem 51, despite its initial optimism, is connected to the violent vocabulary used elsewhere to describe Lesbia.

It has thus been shown how the additions of *ille, si fas est, superare divos* (51.2) and *misero ... eripit* (51.5-6) create parallels with methods Catullus uses elsewhere, according to Konstan, to make his political commentary. The most significant addition, however, is the entire fourth stanza: *otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est: / otio exsultas nimiumque gestis: / otium et reges prius et beatas / perdidit urbes* (“Idleness, Catullus, is troublesome for you: you rejoice and delight in idleness too much: idleness has previously ruined both kings and prosperous cities”). This stanza offers several interesting parallels with poem 29, which Konstan identifies as “the most obviously political statement in the corpus.” Like 28 and 115, it is one of the poems that criticize Mamurra’s excess, be it lack of sexual restraint or greed for new territory. While Thomson notes that some would exclude this final stanza from poem 51 altogether²², scholars have offered several theories to explain why this is in fact part of Catullus’s original poem.²³ There is in fact no reason to rule out the possibility that, as Garrison suggests, this stanza is “Catullus’ Roman conscience speaking, rebuking him for the idleness ... that

18 I.e., Mamurra’s greed or sexual excess is often symbolized by his desire for conquered territory (poem 115), or else is described in a context of military campaigns.

19 Some scholars discuss how Catullus adds *misero* as part of his method of changing Sappho’s feminine poem into a masculine one. For this idea of gender role reversal, see esp. Miller. For this paper’s purposes, the basic meaning of *misero*, and the way in which it contributes to the foreboding found in the poem, will be focused on.

20 E.g., Dyson.

21 Tr. Goold 195.

22 Thomson 327.

23 E.g., Fredricksmayer argues that the poem is about Catullus’s initial infatuation with Lesbia, which has been brought about by *otium*. Knox discusses the *topos* of the dangers of *otium* that can be found in archaic Greek lyric as well. D’Angour suggests, on the basis of the small surviving part of Sappho’s fifth stanza, that Catullus’s fourth stanza is an adaptation of this, the only difference being that he substitutes *otium* for love as the thing that “must be endured.” For a contrary view, that any relationship between Catullus’s fourth stanza and Sappho’s fifth is “mysterious”, see Vine 258.

makes him prey to these feelings.”²⁴ The idea of *otium*, and the trouble that can result from it, can be seen in poem 29. This poem is about Mamurra’s excess – he is the one who is lecherous, gluttonous, and greedy for money. And yet, Konstan notes: “That Catullus felt a profound disgust at the thought of this wastrel cornering all the wealth accumulated through Rome’s military campaigns is obvious, and he resents Caesar and Pompey equally for their condoning of it.” Caesar and Pompey are not the ones committing Mamurra’s crimes of excess, but Catullus still holds them responsible for the consequences of those crimes: *eone nomine, urbis o piissimi, / socer generque, perdidistis omnia?* (“Was it on this account, most honourable men of Rome, / father- and son-in-law, that you ruined the world?”)²⁵ He does not say that Mamurra ruined everything – it was Caesar and Pompey who did. That these are the last lines of poem 29 makes the statement even more significant. The verbs used to describe Caesar and Pompey are indicative of their passive role in Mamurra’s crimes: *videre* (“see”), *pati* (“put up with”), *feres* (“bear”), and *fovetis* (“support, encourage”).²⁶

Similarly, the lack of action inherent in the meaning of *otium* is what has ruined kings and cities in 51.13-16. It is also what Catullus is warning himself against in the same stanza, apparently so that he himself is not similarly ruined. This verb, *pereo*, is used elsewhere to describe how his romantic relationship with Lesbia has been “ruined.”²⁷ It is used in poem 29 to describe the ruinous effects of Caesar’s and Pompey’s inaction against Mamurra. This parallel between the ends of poems 29 and 51 can be furthered if we ask why exactly Catullus mentions *reges* (“kings”) and *urbes* (“cities”) as having been destroyed. This question has received little attention from scholars, who instead seem more concerned with how *otium* relates to the rest of poem 51. But in our present context, a subtle parallel with poem 29 can be seen. There, Caesar and Pompey are described as *urbis o piissimi*. That Catullus should use the word *urbis* suggests that Caesar’s and Pompey’s inaction has resulted in ruin because of the responsibility and power they possess within the city. This also makes logical sense when we consider that their power and responsibility within the political institutions of the *city* of Rome is what enabled them to allow Mamurra to run riot. Another parallel can be seen between *reges* (51.15) and *Romule* (“Romulus”, 29.5, 9), which is how Catullus addresses Caesar and Pompey. As Konstan notes, Catullus elsewhere uses Romulus or his brother Remus, the co-founders of Rome, to represent Roman citizens in general as their descendants. At the end of poem 28 (line 15), Catullus, after criticizing Veranius and Memmius for taking part in the Bithynian governor Memmius’s financial and sexual improprieties, describes them as *opprobria Romuli Remique* (“blots on the names of Romulus and Remus”). At 58.5, Catullus emphasizes the negative effect of Lesbia’s lust on the Roman mores of Roman men: *glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes* (“skinning the descendants of great Remus). The use of *reges* draws lexical parallels with what Konstan has identified as Catullus’s use of Romulus and Remus in politically charged passages. Similarly, *urbes* draws attention to the theme of the general breakdown of the mores of the city of Rome²⁸, as well as to specific word choice at the end of poem 29. Both words bear no direct resemblance to themes discussed in the rest of poem 51, and yet they are emphasized by being placed at the end of the poem.

I wish also to touch on the significance of the adjective *beatas* at line 15, which is used to describe how the cities were prosperous before they were ruined. This same word is used no less than three

24 Garrison 121.

25 Tr. Goold 69.

26 Lines 1, 5, and 21.

27 8.2, 75.2.

28 See Butrica 2002 for an example of how Catullus uses a specific immoral behaviour – incest – to describe the general breakdown of mores in Roman society. Also, Thomson 1997: 340-341 discusses how Catullus uses specific sexual improprieties to level charges of general moral impropriety. Both passages are cited by Konstan.

times in poem 23: *quare non tibi sit bene ac beate?* (“Why should you not be comfortable and well?”, line 15); *haec tu commoda tam beata, Furi, / noli spernere nec putare parvi* (“Having such fine blessings as these, Furius, / do not despise them or think little of them”, line 23); and *sestertia quae soles precari / centum desine: nam sat es beatus* (“Stop your constant begging / for a hundred grand: you are well enough off already”, line 27).²⁹ In his discussion of Catullan invective, Tatum notes how this is one of the poems in which Catullus criticizes “unrestrained physical appetites.”³⁰ This idea of lack of restraint fits well with Konstan’s theory of Lesbia and Mamurra having unrestrained appetites as well. Central to Catullus’s point in this poem is the idea that being *beatus* (“wealthy, blessed”) is not an intrinsically bad thing, but it must have its limits. This is why *sat* is in the last line. In poem 23, Furius is warned to not desire too much when he is already *beatus*. In poem 51, it is wealthy cities, not just ordinary cities, that are destroyed. This is emphasized by the hyperbaton of *beatas perdidit urbes*. In this way, Catullus again departs from Sappho’s text to draw a lexical parallel with another work in his corpus, in order to further develop his interrelated themes of unrestraint, idleness, and ruin.

Besides word choice, Catullus’s style also suggests that his portrayal of his relationship with Lesbia is influenced by his contemporary political context. The theory that poem 51 is, just like poem 11 according to Konstan, about more than just an imperfect romance, can be further developed by considering how Catullus utilizes the sapphic meter. In his recent book *Musa Pedestris*, Llewelyn Morgan discusses the methods used by Roman lyric poets to exploit meters in order to place emphasis on certain aspects of a poem. In his chapter on the sapphic meter, he discusses Catullus’s use of this meter from a literary historical perspective. He explains how Sapphic poetry, and Greek poetry in general, is characterized by an “alliance of style and theme.”³¹ Whereas “violent invective” is more likely to be found in Hipponactean iambic, the Sapphic meter represents “light, elegant, [and] appealing” subject matter.³² This can certainly be seen in Sappho’s fragment 31 – I have explained how Catullus has had to make changes to the Greek poem in order to develop his theme of unrestraint and violence with words like *superare* and *eripit*, as well as the fourth stanza in general.

Even the last remaining line, ἀλλὰ ἐὰν ἐόλμαζον, expressing the idea of endurance (presumably amid the struggles of love), does not have the themes of idleness and ruin seen in Catullus’s final stanza. Unlike Catullus’s poem, there is no clear reason to think that Sappho’s poem is about more than just a strong infatuation.

In this literary historical context, Catullus makes the violence of his theme even more marked by departing from the gracefulness of Sappho’s style. Morgan identifies low vowel sounds, vocabulary of excess, blatant alliteration, and strings of elisions (or synaloephae) as literary devices used by Catullus to separate himself from the characteristic style, as well as the characteristic content, of Greek poems written in the Sapphic meter.³³ Specific examples given by Morgan for poem 11 include *moechis* and *ilia* (low vowel sounds), *trecentos* and *omnium* (excessive expression), and *null(um) amans vere, sed identid(em) omni(um) / ilia rumpens* (synaloephae). Similar characteristics can be seen in poem 51, especially in the final stanza, where the first three lines each have an elision: *tibi molest(um) est: / oti(o) exsultas ... / oti(um) et reges*.³⁴ The previous three stanzas combined contain only one elision – *Lesbi(a), aspexi* (line 7) – and this text is associated with the character of Lesbia, who is the both the theme of Catullus 51 (as opposed to Sappho 31), and one of Catullus’s means of making indirect

29 Tr. Goold. Note that this last example is, as the last word in the poem, placed in an emphatic position.

30 Tatum 2007.

31 Morgan 2010: 202.

32 Morgan 2010: 204.

33 Morgan 2010: 206.

34 Morgan 2010: 246.

political commentary according to Konstan's theory. Within these elided lines, we can also see the use of an excessive word (*nimum*, line 14), and of low vowel sounds (*otium ... otio exsultas ... otium*).

These literary devices contribute to our ability to read poem 51 as violently themed. What Morgan calls the "ugly style"³⁵ of poem 11 can be applied to 51 as well, because Catullus uses the same literary devices to separate his Sapphic poems from their Greek originals in both theme and style. What is particularly interesting for our purposes is that these literary devices are located at points in the text that I and Konstan have identified for their significance to the theme of political undercurrents in the Lesbia poems. The low vowel sounds in 11 (e.g., *moechis*) are related to sexual impropriety; likewise, those in 51 (*otium*) are related to idleness that leads to the inability to stop unrestraint before it happens. Both are related to sexual improprieties and idleness found in more directly political poems like 29 and 115. The excessive words used in 11 (*trecentos, omnium*) are related to sexual excess; those in 51 (*superare divos, nimum*) suggest the idea of excessive enjoyment in a sexual relationship. And elisions are located at strategic locations in the poem, where the words especially contribute to the Konstan theory. In poem 11, these are related in part to the place names that reflect the far-away territory desired by military and political leaders like Mamurra: *sive in extremos* (line 2), *resonante Eoä* (line 3), *sive in Hyrcanos* (line 5), and *Rhenum horribile* (line 11). They also have to do with sexual impropriety (*nullum amans*, line 19; *identidem omnium / ilia* (lines 19-20), and destruction as a result of this excess (*aratro est*, line 24 – the last words of the poem). In poem 51, these have to do with the theme of idleness and how one should not delight too much in it (*molestum est ... otio exsultas ... otium et reges*), as well as the identification of Lesbia, the woman associated with unrestraint and excess in poems 11 and 58 (*Lesbia, aspexi*).

To bring these observations to a conclusion, it must of course be admitted that poem 51 does not describe sexual unrestraint to the same degree as poem 11. Lesbia does not yet have three hundred adulterers as sexual partners, and nor does she tear any man's loins. But at the same time, Catullus does give much subtler hints of unrestraint or excess. In fact, this can be used as an argument for the unity of the poem – by hinting in the first three stanzas at the excess (*superare divos*) and violence (*eripit*) to be seen in other Lesbia poems describing later stages of the relationship, Catullus provides a point of reference within the poem with which to explain what he is warning himself against delighting "too much" (*nimum*) in, another word conveying unrestraint or excess. This can also strengthen the commonly held theory that 51 is the first in Catullus's series of Lesbia poems, while 11 is the last.³⁶ If Catullus is courting the territory of the divinely impermissible by thinking of Lesbia's current partner as superior to the gods, he runs the risk of falling for her by desiring to be in that man's place. For this would then make Catullus himself seem superior to the gods. Lesbia's allure is thus very strong, and it of course turns out to get the better of Catullus – this is why we have a series of poems about their relationship.³⁷ Thus, even if poem 51 does not as obviously contain themes of sexual violence and extreme lust, this can be explained if we accept that the more toned down nature of this theme is due to the fact that this poem is the first in the story of the relationship. It is thus more of a foreshadowing theme in this particular poem, as opposed to poems like 58 and 11 which more explicitly describe Lesbia's destructive sexual violence and lust.

35 Morgan 2010: 206.

36 See Dyson 2007 for a recent discussion of this theory. It is largely based on two factors: a) the two poems are the only ones written in Sapphic meter; and b) 51 most clearly describes Catullus's initial infatuation with Lesbia, while 11 most clearly describes his wish to be rid of her once and for all.

37 It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the extent to which the Lesbia poems reflect Catullus's historical relationship with Lesbia, commonly identified as Clodia. Thus, I use "Catullus" here to refer to the character on the page in the Lesbia poems.

To return to the initial hypothesis of this paper, we may conclude that there are indeed elements of Konstan's theory of subtle political commentary in Catullus 51. It is not as obvious as that of 11 and 58, and can only be fully understood by closely examining how it relates to these and other relevant poems (especially 29). It has also proven useful to compare the poem with the original Sappho fragment it is based on, in order to make it more clear that Catullus wishes to emphasize these lexical and thematic parallels with more directly politically charged poems. This is particularly relevant to the recent tendency in Catullan studies to look for how hints of Catullus's sociopolitical commentary can be found even in the more personal Lesbia poems. Close comparison of poem 51 with other parts of the Catullan corpus ultimately reveals that this poem is influenced by the poet's general dislike of the tendency in his contemporary Roman society for people to be driven by unrestrained lust and greed, in the same way that Konstan has shown other Lesbia poems to be influenced by this sociopolitical context. It also reveals how the Lesbia narrative as a whole, rather than just individual Lesbia poems taken in isolation, is itself an example of this sociopolitical influence.

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