Poetry as Performance: The Case for "Camp" in Catullus

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The poet Gaius Valerius Catullus, presumed to have lived from 84-54 B.C.E., is one of the most notable writers of Roman times. He and others in his era were titled "Neoteric" authors by Cicero—writers who moved away from "pompous" epic poems to poems with brevity and personal details, along with utilizing Greek traditions in satire (Green 10). His poetry collection is polymetric, containing a lot of satire but also a significant portion directed to or about "Lesbia," an alias for a girlfriend. Catullus 16 is particularly graphic as it levies sexual threats at his friends, but it is not unusual in his body of work. At face value, his poems seem to represent stereotypical toxic masculinity, as Roman men derided sexual passivity and correlated it to effeminacy. Their ideologies were not targeted at same-sex attraction, only demanding that masculinity must be the controlling figure, the active penetrator rather than the opposite. There are dangers in conflating the narrator of a poem and the author, but as his poems name himself as a character and contain biographical details, I will refer to them as the same rather than figure out the differences, as my sources use the same assumption. While these poems may be interpreted as reflections of homophobic and hyper-masculine ideologies of the time, I argue that his writing is a form of stylized performative activity discussed by Judith Butler, showing his personal aggression like in Catullus 16 but also the emotional sensitivity in other poems.

He exhibits exaggeratedness and humor, writing with feminine qualities along with his expected masculine ones. By analyzing these poems with this queer theory lens, I assert that these performances relate to Susan Sontag's definition of "camp," showing humorous double-meanings and exaggeration that reflects his personhood as more androgynous and layered than what typical Roman masculinity demands.

The camp taste is not one easily defined and may seem too modern to discuss things within the pre-modern world. The Oxford English Dictionary puts its origins at 1909-1910, used to describe things that are flamboyant or related to homosexual communities. Susan Sontag wrote in her 1964 "Notes on Camp" that it was a slang term, but never really defined due to the difficulty of defining such a sensibility. She states that something that was camp was good *because* it was so bad (530). Campy objects, then, are so excessive and extravagant in their bad qualities that they become good. Or, not—which is what her other fifteen pages outline. It was also discussed by Esther Newton in *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* in 1972, analyzing homosexual communities who performed drag. While both of these texts are useful, I believe Sontag's definition is more useful in analyzing Catullus's works for its discussion on camp regardless of gender/sexual orientation, which wasn't the same in the Roman eras. Furthermore, she discusses aspects of fashion, double-meanings, and androgyny, which can all be discovered in Catullus's poems. The camp sensibility is then highly conceptual, but what usually remains is its insistence on theatricality and extravagance. It is androgynous and without identity restrictions, meaning anyone can enjoy it. "The connoisseur of Camp has found more ingenious pleasures. Not in Latin poetry and rare wines and in velvet jackets, but in the coarsest common pleasures, in the arts of the masses," Sontag writes (528). By tying Latin poetry (formal, scholarly) with rare wines (expensive, acquired taste) or velvet jackets (expensive, rarity of silk), Sontag is stating that selective and pretentious pleasures cannot be camp—so how can Catullus be?

My argument that Catullus is camp is based off my belief that she does not mean camp cannot be related to anything Roman—after all, they certainly had their own art and culture as well. In her article "Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality: Dandies in Roman Antiquity," Kelly Olson discusses dandyism (fashionable, and deeply related to camp with its commitment to expressing an extravagant aesthetic) in Roman times,

showing even in the pre-modern world that men could be fashionable or effeminate without being homosexual. Furthermore, Catullus wasn't "wealthy by Roman standards," revealing he wasn't the highborn artist some might imagine, and even though he was read in his time, his "true fame has been entirely posthumous" (Green 3, 19). Being a Neoteric poet, he didn't create examples of epics like the *Aeneid*; indeed, he even popularized a poetic form, showing he wasn't only a copy of his literary predecessors and instead an earnest writer. Garrison writes in *The Students' Catullus* that his hendecasyllabic meter's "insistent iambic second half gives it a colloquial, vernacular quality that evokes the comic stage and the rhythms of street language" (174). Catullus's works, then, are deeply related to the people's taste, revealing humorous exaggeration, androgyny, and extravagance—therefore, not the formulaic and pretentious aura that Latin poems and rare wines give off, which seems to be what Sontag is drawing upon in her claim.

Catullus's poems can convey theatricality as they are deeply committed to satirical humor and double-meanings, while also not fully fitting within the Roman's expected ideas of masculinity. The poems I will be discussing each convey these points. The sparrow poems, for instance, can be interpreted as a metaphor for sexual activity. Interpreting the sparrow as a double entendre highlights his work as related to "camp." The first sparrow poem discusses the bird and how it is loved by Lesbia. The sparrow is "always her plaything, held fast in her bosom [… quīcum lūdere, quem in sinū tenēre.]" (Catullus 2A). This describes the actions of the bird and how it was held in her breast, at the end wishing he could play with it as she does. To look more closely, in sinū could be Lesbia's lap where Catullus's member might be. The sparrow "pecking" at her finger, also, could be an aggressive reaction that results from sexual stimulation. Ted Somerville, an advocate of the sparrow as a sexual metaphor, writes that Martial, another Roman poet, seems to have interpreted the sparrow this way and also analyzes an Ovid allusion to Catullus as a similar obscene metaphor (276). If this interpretation goes back so far to Catullus's own contemporaries, it holds literary weight.

Further evidence of the sexual metaphor is Lesbia's name—often identified as an alias for a specific woman, the name itself seems to be a reference to the Greek poet Sappho's native island of Lesbos. Catullus was concerned with his Greek predecessors, as he was bilingual in the language and even replicated Sapphic quatrains in two poems in his

collections (Green 37). Some identify the name "Lesbia" as a specific individual, but this representation of her exists as more of a concept due to the alias and depiction of her through Catullus's own interpretative lens. This name reveals an interest in his literary predecessors and perhaps provides insight into the nature of his sparrow. Catullus, as a reader of Sappho, would have read this fragment where sparrows are also mentioned drawing the chariot of Aphrodite:

> your chariot yoked with lovely sparrows
> drawing you quickly over the dark earth
> in a whirling cloud of wings down
> the sky through midair. (Rayor and Lardinois 2)

Harold Zellner argues that the sparrows drawing Aphrodite's chariot were intended to be lighthearted in nature, an attempt at humor at the imagery of these small sparrows somehow "yoked" like bulls to the chariot of a goddess (8). There is, then, the contrast of this humorous image with the serious love of the rest of the poem. The sparrow is tied to the Greek goddess of sexual love, which lends further credence to the erotic interpretation of Catullus's poems as a bit of sexual humor in his own love poem. After all, in the second sparrow poem, Catullus tells "Cupids all, every Venus" to mourn the death of Lesbia's beloved bird (3). Surely, if the sparrow didn't have a secret meaning, other Roman gods would be more appropriate to address the lament to. So, why the gods of love and sex? If the sparrow represents his penis, as his contemporaries think and the Sappho allusions imply, then the death of the bird would mean his penis is not making Lesbia happy, as it is when she is playing with it in the first poem. With this interpretation, Catullus seems to be admitting to the world that he is impotent, which as Somerville points out in his article, "Catullus could then be accused of engaging in unmanly relations with Lesbia" (275). Virility being important to the masculine role in sex, Catullus seems to be not quite fulfilling in this way.

The sparrow poems, then, live in this double-space where Catullus seems to thrive, interpreted as either a literal sparrow or a joke about impotency. This fits exactly with Susan Sontag's notes on the "camp" sensibility: "Behind the 'straight' public sense in which the thing can be taken, one has found a private witty experience of the thing" (Sontag 521). The literal interpretation could be seeing the bird for what it is, but just as Sappho does in her poem about Aphrodite, the sparrow can be tied to a sexual interpretation as well. Even the poem's subject

about Lesbia—the concept of a woman rather than a literal one—relates to camp's relationship to exaggeration within concepts. "To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" (Sontag 56). The sparrow is not just a sparrow; Lesbia is not just a woman; each acts as the concept of what its named as, and also its second witty meaning. Even Catullus's hendecasyllabic meter relates: the meter itself gives the sparrow poems a vernacular feel. As Garrison writes, this gives the lines a theatrical effect, achieving perhaps the same goal Sappho tried to achieve with her chariot spoked with sparrows—tying the serious to something lighthearted. The poem seems to be a serious mournful poem, or it could just be humorously writing an earnestly mournful poem when all that truly occurred is an instance of impotence. These two relate because camp exists as theatrical exaggeration and thrives within androgyny, just as Catullus lives not completely fulfilling the masculine role with joked-about impotency.

In other poems, Catullus subverts typical Roman masculinity. There is the sensitivity that he holds for his brother's passing, and the romantic love for Lesbia that fits this notion. Poems 101, 65, 66, and 68a/b seem to be about this grief. 101 seems the most centered around this, as it reads like Catullus were giving a funeral address: "A journey across many seas and through many nations / has brought me here, brother, for these poor obsequies [Multas per gentes et multa per aequora / uectus aduenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias]." These lines allude to the Odyssey but differ in its lament—Odysseus travels to the realm of the dead and can speak to them, but Catullus cannot as much as he wishes to (Seider 288). Catullus's repeated references to mythological figures in these poems imply he feels responsible for his brother's death just like his other allusions to Procne and Penelope (Seider 293). Romans highly value stoicism, and Catullus's grieving methods giving the lament in 101 only relate to what is expected of masculine grief.

In the other grieving poems, however, is where Catullus expresses this feminine means of grief. "I shall cherish you always, always make songs that are saddened by your death [At certe semper amabo, semper maesta tua carmina morta canam]" (Catullus 65). Singing is what women are expected to do as mourners, yet Catullus imagines himself this way. In order to maintain his societal obligations, however, he must forgo this grief as depicted in the poem to send Hortalus some translated verses

instead:

> . . . when Catullus' sorrow shuts him off from this kind of communication—as is graphically illustrated in each case when the poet breaks off his addresses to Hortalus and Mallius in order to apostrophize his irrevocably absent brother—the psychological aspects of the poet's suffering are emphatically juxtaposed with social ones. (Felldher 214)

His grief separates him from masculine societal demands, and Seider argues that feminine ways of grieving are less restricting and more fulfilling to him (309). He also repeatedly relates himself to feminine figures in myth, and imagining himself as a blushing maiden when he finishes apostrophizing his brother. This continues further:

> From the day I first put on the white gown of manhood,
> when my budding years were in their enchanted spring,
> I played to the limit
> [tempore quo primum uestis mihi tradita pura est,
> iucundum cum aetas florida uer ageret,
> multa satis lusi . . .] (Catullus 68A)

"Ludere," the verb, can be translated as "play" or "trick." It is interesting how Catullus had been fully embodying masculinity and doing those duties as long as he's been wearing a toga until his brother's death, where it becomes an act or a deception, something he had been doing but no longer is. Catullus in these ways depicts a multifaceted, feminine way of grieving, showing how masculinity can be subverted in these instances.

What further complicates these poems, though, is that Catullus expresses his grief in public unlike his contemporaries. Cicero writes in private letters his difficulty in performing masculine stoicism in grieving after his daughter Tullia's death (Seider 284). As Catullus writes to Calvus, "surely it's not so much grief that's felt by Quintilia / at her premature death, as joyfulness in your love [certe non tanto mors immature dolori est / Quintiliae, quantum gaudet amore tuo]" (96). When he writes to Calvus in 96, he is comforting him by saying Quintilia can take comfort in his love. Yet, he is not taking comfort in his own loved one's death in the ways that these two authors are. He writes his grief in poems that will be read by a public audiences that, as just discussed, subvert his gender's expectations: "Catullus chooses to make his reaction to his brother's death public, and by situating his grief within poems that emphasize the reciprocal duties binding himself and his addressees, he creates a ten-

sion between his social and commemorative obligations" (Seider 285). Catullus talks about his brother in these poems before going back to the original task asked of him by Hortalus or Mallius, instead of doing it in the first place, showing how these emotions pull away from these expected tasks. His public poems are inherently performative, expressing himself in a way that others can clearly see. While this might put his gender in question, Catullus himself seems to refuse this as we see in the historically censored Catullus 16.

Catullus 16 is a response to Aurelius and Furius, who have critiqued Catullus as a feminine-embodying man.[1] The poem that sparks this controversy is Catullus 5, an elegiac couplet directed at Lesbia that asks for a thousand kisses between the two. This romantic gesture is what puts his masculinity into doubt by the two men. Catullus disputes this, admitting that although the verses may not be "manly: does that make *me* indecent? [quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum]" (16). By stating this, he aims to separate his poems from himself, defending his masculinity from his friends. Sexual activity for the Greeks (and therefore the Romans) was less about a certain orientation and more about the gendered role taken: "the one who performs the activities and the one on whom it is performed" (Foucault 67). Masculinity, then, was correlated to the active participant, which he sets himself in in his poetic response: "Up yours both, and sucks to the pair of you, / Queen Aurelius, Furius the faggot [Pedicabo ego uos et irrumabo, / Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi]" (Catullus 16). By threatening to sexually assault Aurelius and Furius, he is denigrating them and assigning them the role of the passive participant reserved for women, boys, and slaves. In turn, he re-masculinizes himself.

Interpreting this as wholly literal would be understandable; after all, Catullus seems to be denigrating passive sexual participants in this work and others. For example, free men and boys were described by him as having long hair in a derogatory way, showing how he believed a man had to not be effeminate in order to escape criticism (Olson 188). I would argue, however, that this poem is not as it seems with its hyper-masculinist showing. Camp is related to the overexaggerated, being "serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" (Sontag 527). Being called less than fully masculine is a serious insult, and yet the ex-

1 Another interpretation that was consulted, albeit non-academic, exists on Catullus 16; see "Roman Camp: The Case of Catullus 16" by Michael Broder for a camp-centered take on this poem.

treme retaliation of his words (Catullus may genuinely be upset, but he is not literally going to rape the two) doesn't fit the tone of these serious accusations. With such a visual threat, this moment matches up with the excessive nature of the camp sensibility. Needlessly graphic, the poem is so over-the-top that it *becomes* good and humorous to the reader. Even the repetition of the first and last line emphasizes the sexual threat, making it specific as an action he will carry out, since "ego" (I) is not a necessary word for the subject to be understood in Latin. Surely, one fully secure in their masculinity surely would not react in this highly reactive way. Just as he uses double meanings in other poems, I believe this is the case here, too.

The poems discussed so far show that Catullus does not fully exemplify Roman masculinity, and yet he claims that these poems drawing from his personal life have nothing to do with him personally. Judith Butler argues gender isn't a "seemingly seamless identity," and therefore gender transformation is possible with a "different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (520). While Catullus seems to be denying that these "girly" poems reflect himself, I believe that the writing of these poems actually contradicts his own statements, making them "stylized repetition[s] of acts through time" (Butler 520). His actions in his grief are not just situated solely into masculinity, along with his "flowery" love for Lesbia and the question of his sexual activity in the sparrow poems. In his poems, Catullus often refers to himself as his own character, directly addressing his self instead of the audience. Poems in this era were not mass-produced—they were intended to be spoken or sung, meaning literally anyone with the capacity for hearing could enjoy Catullus. The deeply personal details, the fact that the crafting of Catullus's persona comes from the poems and not personal relations to listeners—these are what make up listeners' perceptions of Catullus, not his over-the-top denial of these performances. If Catullus is continuously subverting his own masculinity and these acts are widely shared with the public within his poems, there can be no difference between Catullus's body and the body of his work. Due to these reasons, the repetitive performance of these nonnormative Roman gender ideals means Catullus is what he says he is not. His poems reveal his acts as gender transformation, one that others can perceive him with even if he disputes that in Catullus 16.

Although Catullus says his poems are unreflective of his person-

hood in Catullus 16, we can see from the concept of gender performativity and his repetition of these subversive acts that this is not the case. The double-meanings and exaggeration in his poems, and the feminine qualities that this masculine figure exhibits are related to the camp sensibility. Stated earlier, Catullus seems to buy into Roman masculinity, critiquing men for having long hair (which he saw as feminine) and arguing for his masculinity in Catullus 16. A feminine man, in the Roman's eyes, made them seem like a bottom in homosexual sex, but Olson discusses Roman men and dandyism and how some of these attributes could instead be attributed to men of fashion pursuing women. A few of these qualities could be long hair, wearing too many adornments, or being heavily perfumed, which "was seen by some as un-Roman" (Olson 190). Yet, in Catullus 13, he invites a man named Fabullus over, making a joke that he should bring everything such as the delicious meal and a beautiful girlfriend to converse with—because he himself has a wallet full of cobwebs. Except one item, which he'll "contribute the unguent that the Cupids—Venuses too—of passion gave my girlfriend [nam unguentum dabo,quod meae puellae donarunt Veneres Cupidinesque]" (Catullus 13). Despite his intent on seeming like a masculine poet, Catullus imagines himself perfumed like a woman, but also receiving gifts and depending on the wealth of his girlfriend. The humor of this poem is the fact that Catullus invites someone to dinner—but doesn't have an item to his name for this guest except for perfume. The fact that he has a woman and yet has this "effeminate" scent relates to Olson's concept of the Roman dandy man, whose fashion relates to Camp in its androgyny and extravagance being highly dedicated to one's own appearance. Sontag states:

> the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one's sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is beautiful in feminine women is something masculine. (519)

What is "camp," then, in Catullus is humorous double-meanings and androgyny, where people exhibit multiple traits not constricted by biological sex and gender. In Catullus 13 and the previously discussed poems, the subversion of Catullus's masculinity and the exaggerated humor in his poems show camp in these ways. All these performances relate to his personhood and show him as a masculine and feminine figure, whether

it be through grief or satire.

To conclude, Catullus's poems, especially Catullus 16, can indeed be interpreted as examples of the repressive ideologies working within the Roman era, specifically deriding sexual passivity regardless of gender. Yet, this queer theory lens reveals complexities with humor and seriousness, and masculinity and femininity within gender expression. In the sparrow poems, Catullus exhibits a form of masculine and feminine sexual act that is intended as humorous, exhibiting both qualities. As discussed previously, he shows a feminine means of grieving and humorous exaggeration in Catullus 16 and 13. Ultimately, existing within this layered interpretative and androgynous space *is* a camp activity. Catullus is a pre-modern example of camp as we know it today.

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