

## Virtue and Voyeurism: An Analysis of Catullus 51

“In my eyes he seems like a god’s co-equal,  
 he, if I dare say so, eclipses godhead,  
 who now face to face, uninterrupted,  
 watches and hears you

sweetly laughing — *that* sunders unhappy me  
 from

all my senses: the instant I catch sight of  
 you now, Lesbia, dumbness grips my <voice”

“Leisure, Catullus, is dangerous to you:  
 leisure  
 urges you into extravagant behavior:  
 leisure in time gone has ruined kings and  
 prosperous cities.”

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

dulce ridentum, misero quod omnis  
 eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,  
 Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi  
 <vocis”

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

Lesbia, a married woman and Catullus’ lover, is the muse of many poems in his collection. In a typical affair, the lover would have a distaste for the husband, but Catullus is no normal man. In poem 51, Catullus describes him in the type of way that Romans would use to describe a “good man,” placing him in the shoes of one who possesses virtue. But, there is also a sense of unease with Catullus throughout the poem. Using words such as “videtur” and “aspexi” show that he has distanced himself from the events that are taking place between Lesbia and the man, whether that distance be emotional or physical; he even results to speaking to himself, showing that his intention

is to stay hidden, like a voyeuristic individual who is watching a sexual act take place between a couple.

From the beginning of the poem, it is evident that Catullus has an abundant amount of respect for Lesbia's husband. His first mention of him calls him "god's co-equal" and goes even further than that, saying, "he, if I dare say so, eclipses godhead." In Catullus's eyes, this man is the most powerful to exist, even more powerful than God. This is because, as he says in the next four lines, this man is unbothered by Lesbia's presence, a presence which makes him feel "sunder[ed]," or disconnected/detached, in a way that separates him from everything in both himself and the world around him (s.v.1b). A common attribute of "good men," in the words of Seneca, is that they are able to "suppress any sign of wounds and dig in [their] heels" (Barton 21). Even if he is impacted in the same way that Catullus is, he is able to suppress it in such a way that even Catullus is surprised.

His obsession with the man is also shown by the constant repetition of his name in the first stanza. There is a threefold repetition of "ille...ille...qui," that adds emphasis to just how intoxicating this man's behavior is to him. Though he praises him on and on, he still does not provide his name in an attempt to keep some power in his own possession in order to avoid being completely submissive to him. By only referring to him as *ille* ("that man"), he does not allow him to have the satisfaction of being labelled

as a person who is known for being so powerful. If Catullus would give the man's name, everyone would know of who he is and therefore also connect the dots between the affair that is going on between himself and Lesbia. This relationship between Catullus and the man is one that can be compared to that of the master and slave depicted by Barton; Catullus is consumed by how the man is unbothered by Lesbia and attempts to learn from him, and the man in return gets this poem of admiration written about him. Though the two never have a conversation, they still are indirectly involved in a mutualistic relationship (Barton 20).

This man is not the extent of which Catullus' fascination is focused, though: his gaze is on both of them, and the situation that they are taking part in. The word "adversus," meaning "face to face, in the presence of" (s.v.1a) shows that the two are in close proximity to each other, close enough that the man both can hear Lesbia "sweetly laughing" and be able to study her face. Being this close to each other with such a personal, romantic activity happening adds an erotic connotation to the events. Another layer is added to this when observing the fact that no characters, other than Catullus, are in the area. Based on the fact that the man can "uninterrupted[ly]" watch Lesbia and take part in this situation, they are not even aware that Catullus is watching over them, and are acting in a way that they would when they are alone. This puts Catullus in the position of a "voyeur," a "person whose sexual desires are stimulated by covert observations of the sexual activities of others" (s.v.1a). The situation that Catullus is

watching also proves to be quite painful to him: he mentions “unhappiness” and “dumbness,” which could go hand and hand with the fact that he wants to be in the place of the man himself. He could easily look away to avoid this consistent pain that he is putting himself through, but he refuses, possibly using this as a way of coming to terms with the fact that he will never be as well suited for Lesbia as this man is. If he can’t even keep his composure when catching sight of her, it would be impossible for him to spend the rest of his life in her presence.

Other evidence to suggest that Catullus is in a voyeuristic position is the fact that the last stanza is nothing but a conversation with himself. This is an attempt to be silent in order to avoid being caught by Lesbia and the man, but within this, he has a personal revelation. After spending what feels like forever watching these two partake in a seemingly sexual act, he has finally realized how much of an impact this *molestum* or *leisure*, “freedom or opportunity to do something specified or implied” (s.v.1a) or “the state of having time at one’s own disposal” (s.v.3a), has on him, both emotionally and politically. This free time that he possesses has led him to “extravagant behavior” that has brought out his emotions toward himself, Lesbia, and the man, and put him in a perpetual state of depression. This is dangerous to him, because something that he wishes for throughout this poem is to be in the position of this virtuous man, the virtuous man who is able to control his emotions in any situation. If he was in a situation of battle and had this same type of emotional reaction, he would never again

be seen as having virtue. His overreaction to this situation has already caused him to paint a picture in his mind of an ensuing downfall that will never allow him to be the same individual again.

Besides emotions, being caught in this situation itself is one that would have detrimental effects on his reputation. He says that this kind of predicament has “ruined kings and prosperous cities,” and seeing himself in this same place would ruin both his personal and political life, being a “shame and a scandal” as Juvenal similarly says that an unshielded man in battle would be (Barton 26). If a person of considerable power was caught watching over an individual, word of this would quickly spread and their trustworthiness would be completely tarnished. Friends and supporters of equal power would not want to be associated with someone who was known to be a sort of watchdog ([a person] to attend, follow, or guard an activity, situation, etc.) (s.v.1a). Those who previously looked up to him as a public figure would now be suspicious that they were being watched over at all times just as Lesbia and the man were, and this paranoia may even lead to something as deranged as killing the ruler to escape this state of internal tension.

Works Cited

Barton, Carlin A. *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: the Gladiator and the Monster.*

Princeton University Press, 1996.

Catullus, Gaius Valerius., and Peter Green. *The Poems of Catullus: a Bilingual Edition.*

University of California Press, 2005.