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CATULLUS' LESBIA AS A POETIC PARADIGM

According to Apuleius' later note, which evidently survived as a tradition, Catullus' Lesbia was in fact called Clodia, Tibullus' Delia – Plania and Propertius' Cynthia – Hostia (Apology, 10). Such identifications are normally associated with a legend as the poetic image of the beloved is composed of not only and not actual biographic facts. It owes much to the imagination of a poet, imitations, influences and literary traditions. Remarkably, Apuleius does not mention the prototype of Ovid's Corinna as the creative transformation is much more explicit in this regard. All relevant properties suggest that Corinna is a generalized image. However, reader's imagination has always tried to detect a real person under the name.¹

In general, tradition very often connects love lyrics of a famous poet with a famous beauty. And the poets do not normally mind the spread of such versions as they contribute to their popularity.

Such information should not be taken for granted even if the identification is commonly admitted, as the process of artistic creation remarkably transfigures casual events. Catullus' attribution of a particular property to Lesbia is unobjectionable in terms of artistic dimension and it does not matter for the proper perception of an artistic piece whether she really possessed the property or not.

The efforts of researchers to identify the ladies mentioned by Apuleius were successful only in case of Lesbia-Clodia. Other identifications failed because of scarce historical data.

For a long time, nobody took interest in Clodia mentioned by Apuleius. She was believed to be an ordinary Roman lady of no strict moral, who unawares stimulated the outburst of Catullus' poetic talent and the development of his lyrics into a supreme poetic event.

¹ Wheeler A. L., *Catullus and the Traditions of Ancient Poetry*, Los Angeles, 1934, 121-122.

Researches of the later period (XVIII-XIX cc.) treated the issues with far great interest. Before proceeding to the principal point, the paper will briefly present the actual circumstances which scrupulously restored.

Clodia was a rather popular name among Romans. It is mentioned five times in the surviving inscriptions of Verona, the native town of Catullus. A large number of historical documents were examined and the most reliable one was chosen. However, the picture was not much pleasing.

Lesbia-Clodia was a younger sister of Clodius Pulcher, a well-known public tribune, a figure of disrepute. She was born in 95 or 94 B.C., and consequently was 8-10 years older than Catullus. She was married to her own cousin, Metellus Celer, but their marriage was not happy. According to Plutarch, Clodia even planned to divorce her husband and marry Cicero.

Cicero had close relations with Clodius, but then became a bitter enemy to both brother and sister. According to Plutarch, he changed his mind because of his wife who was jealous of Clodia. Whether at his wife's instigations or not, Cicero starts to revile Clodia and speak of her adultery as of something so far unheard of. He claims her responsible for her husband's death. Cicero also speaks of her incestuous relationship with her brother when she moved to his place after her husband's death. He states that the dissolute woman certainly deserves his hatred and that the feeling is mutual.

Such hostile words about Clodia are not fully reliable, but even if some of the numerous accusations expressed by Cicero are true, one can hardly imagine how anybody could ever love such a woman. Anyway, some time earlier, Cicero himself spoke about the magnificent brightness of Clodia's eyes.

Clodia was a lady of high social rank. She was charming, cultivated and shrewd. Cicero's attitude to this woman resembles that of Catullus. In some of Catullus' poems, which can be attributed to the latest period of his love to Clodia, Lesbia is mentioned with the same reviling words. Such likeness of emotions can be explained by one particular personal trait of the lady – evidently, she evoked strong passion but love relations with her would end with violent break.

It is interesting whether Clodia was really Catullus' Lesbia or not. What can be learned about Lesbia from the lyrics? She was a beautiful woman and unfaithfulness was her typical feature. Nevertheless, Rome abounded in such women – there could be hosts of Clodias. However, Catullus' poem cited below rejects such an assumption:

*Lesbius est pulcher. quid ni? quem Lesbia malit
quam te cum tota gente, Catulle, tua.*

sed tanem hic pulcher vendat cum gente Catullum,
si fria notorum savia repperit.²

Analogically with Cicero, this poem alludes to the incest. It is another point whether it refers to a true fact or not; the principal thing is that the poet repeats the same. Lesbius and Lesbia, Clodius and Clodia – the names are obviously parallel. As regards the suggestion of incest, one should bear in mind the Roman tradition of giving names.

Admittedly, Roman women had no own appellations but bore family names. By mentioning Lesbius and Lesbia the poet means that this couple was either father and daughter or brother and sister. Since the first option is less likely in such a context, they were evidently brother and sister. Besides, the recurrent use of the word "pulcher", which was attached to Clodius' name, removes all doubts over the identity of Lesbia with Clodia. However, the cycle of poems devoted to Lesbia have some details that do not fit Clodia. This may prompt us to regard Lesbia as a generalized image. However, they are too insignificant to affect the principal point.

In purely poetic terms, identification of Lesbia with Clodia is not so much relevant. It only helps a researcher to find out how a commonplace reality can be transfigured into the poetic one. Much more significant are the ways and means the poet uses to shape the image of Lesbia as the artistic reality.

Lesbia's particular popularity throughout all epochs since the ancient period is the best evidence to the great artistic significance of the poetic image. Martialis used to say that Lesbia was much more popular in Rome than Fair Helen herself.³

Naturally, Lesbia became a source of inspiration for other poets as well. Tibullus called his first book "Delia", and Propertius – "Cynthia". Both names are pseudonyms and were introduced in the poetry after Lesbia. Although Ovid did not call his book "Corinna", the name more closely resembles Lesbia, as its bearer (Corinna) was a distinguished Greek lyric poetess.

When choosing a pseudonym for the beloved the poets followed the following rule: the number and length of vowels of the pseudonym should fully coincide with those of the real name so that both could freely fit in the same poem. When a poet was presenting a copy of his book to his beloved, it should have the real name. The only name which could not be easily replaced with Cynthia was Hostia. According to one particular rule of Latin versifica-

² Catull. Carm. 79.

³ Stoessl F., Catull als Epigrammatiker, "Wiener Studien", 1957, LXX, 294.

tion, sound "h" prevents such substitution. However, it was discovered that its folk pronunciation sounded as Fostia – so it also followed the tradition.⁴

The image of the beloved is created according to Catullus' Lesbia. However, despite a large number of the texts (and Propertius and Ovid offer an almost unlimited array of situations), none of the images acquired the like vividness and popularity – all of them remained Lesbia's pale shadows. Naturally, what matters most is the poetic gift; however, all of the three poets were endowed with rare talent and therefore it is not solely the texture of poems that accounts for such a difference; in fact, their approach to the material is different; Catullus is unsophisticated and ingenuous, he avoids abstract and high-flown reasoning.

As mentioned above, there is nothing that could throw light on Lesbia's image and present it more distinctly – neither her looks nor her character traits are described. One can only have an idea on the features that fit Delia, Cynthia and Corinna. All of them are beautiful and very often give grounds for jealousy. From this angle, they are all alike. But what is it that makes Lesbia so much attractive?

The Lesbia poems constitute one cycle quite easily and naturally. Although chronological properties of certain poems are hard to determine, their general contours are so elaborate and neat that readers can easily orientate themselves in Catullus' poetic world, which at first may seem simple but in fact is overflowing with emotions.

Catullus is infatuated with Lesbia but does not seem sure whether his feeling is responsive. The first poem of the cycle originated with Sappho and represents her poem's most precise translation. Only the final lines belong to Catullus. The poem describes the first wonder of the lover. The look, voice and laughter of the desired, in which others take just careless delight, dim the poet's mind and render him incapable to move.

Allusion to Sappho at the very start of their relationship, alongside the fact that Catullus calls the lady Lesbia already in the first poem, is not accidental; it is motivated by realistic circumstances – the poet means to send this creation to his future mistress. He is sure the lady will immediately recognize his poetic lines and will duly appreciate them. Evidently, Catullus knows she is a connoisseur of poetry and is particularly fond of the Lesbos-born poetess. In such circumstances, his address to her as to Lesbia becomes a subtle compliment.

Thereafter starts the cloudless period of their relationship:

⁴ Die Gedichte des Catullus, Einleitung von A. Riese, Leipzig, IX.

Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus,
rumoresque senum severiorum
omnes unius aestimemus assis.⁵

The same undisturbed feeling dominates two small poems dedicated to Lesbia's bird. The first one pictures Lesbia playing with it; this naive scene provokes such an intimacy in the reader that Lesbia starts to be perceived as someone very much familiar.

The second one, which describes the death of the bird, is written in light and slightly ironic mood. The image of Lesbia with reddened and tearful eyes in the concluding lines adds worm humor to the end of the poem. Readers' liking for Lesbia increases. These small and seemingly idle "nugae" lead in fact to the world of joy and pleasing nonchalance.

The poet admires the beauty of his sweetheart; however, he never describes it directly. He neither mentions her crystal breast nor compares her with sun and moon. Only once, in the minutes of sweet endearment, he mentions the starry heaven (7, 7-8). Comparing his mistress with other fair ladies fills him with indignation (43 and 86) as beauty is erroneously examined through separate features while the overall harmony and grace is neglected.

However, such peaceful delight does not last long. The period of jealousy, temporary partings and reconciliations starts. Catullus convinces himself that it is better to part in time as what was the best in their relations will never come back:

Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire,
et quod vides perisse perditum ducas.
fulsere quondam candidi tibi soles,
cum ventitabas qoo puella ducebat
amata nobis quantum amabitur nulla.⁶

Nevertheless, in spite of such emotional calls, his decision is not yet strong. It is not easy for him to pull out Lesbia from his heart for good.

When Catullus is driven to despair, he does not spare reviling words. Once he even calls the aristocratic lady a streetwalker:

Caeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa,
illa Lesbia, quam Catullus unam
plus quam se atque suos amavit omnes,
nunc in quadriuis et angiportis
glubit magnanimos Remi nepotes.⁷

⁵ Catull. Carm. 5.

⁶ *ibid.*, 8, 1-5.

⁷ *ibid.*, 58.

Lesbia, although faithful to her lax morals, is not indifferent towards the poet and always succeeds to make it up with him. The poet regrets his bitter words, and his heart is once again filled with a new wave of admiration (107). He tries to believe the sincerity of Lesbia's vows. However, a faint mistrust is still discernible amid the lines.

Before the ultimate break of their relations the poet writes one of his best pieces in which he addresses Lesbia with words of sheer contempt. This poem stirs disputes among researchers as some suggest the woman it describes is not Lesbia.

Adeste, hendecasylabi, quot estis
omnes, undique, quotquot estis omnes.
iocum me putat esse moecha turpis
et negat mihi vestra reddituram
pugilaria, si pati potestis.
persequamur eam, et reflagitemus.
que sit, quaeritis. illa, quam videtis
turpe incedere, mimice ac moleste
ridentum catuli ore Gallicani.
circumsistite eam et reflagitate
'moecha putida, redde condicillos.'
'redde, moecha putida, condicillos.'⁸

As we see, the lady has taken away the poems from Catullus and is not going to give them back. A strange situation, is not it? Why does she need them? Can she be so fond of poetry that life without them proves impossible to her? This should have delighted the poet; however, he is exasperated instead, and does not spare scurrilous epithets towards the lady. One may think the poet's behavior lacks psychological grounds. Hence, the situation seems fabricated, which in fact is by no means typical of Catullus' poetry.

If the fact is true and the poet used it to compose his small masterpiece, it may have only one psychological explanation. The relations between the couple are so strained that every trifle thing can anytime bring them to the end. The lady is much concerned with the fate of the poems: they are dedicated to her. The indignant poet may either destroy them or, if they are too dear to him, find a substitution for the dedicatee – there will certainly be host of those willing. The lady is not going to tolerate this.

Let us bear in mind that poetry was highly prestigious in Ancient Rome. Julius Caesar was rather upset when Catullus wrote about him with the scurrility that the great politician admitted was personally damaging and would

⁸ *ibid.*, 42, 1-12.

leave its mark on history. Caesar made efforts to have Catullus write a few lines giving him praise, and finally succeeded.

So, one can imagine how important the exalted lines were to an attractive lady as they were dedicated to her. Therefore, this poem undoubtedly belongs to the Lesbia cycle. The lady could be Lesbia only.

One more thing to be mentioned in this regard is Catullus' infallible sense of subtle humor which does not fail him even in such an extremely critical situation.

The final break comes soon. The end of this love story, like its start, leads to the Lesbos-born poetess. The final poem resembles the first one; it is also structured to the Sapphic meter. The cycle is closed.

Among the most remarkable properties of the Lesbia cycle in particular and of Catullus' poetry in general is its ingenuousness matched with the naturalness of situations. Besides, it is free of rhetoric and reasoning.

As stated above, Tibullus' Delia, Propertius' Cynthia and Ovid' Corinna are the images inspired by Lesbia. It was also said that they appear pale when compared to Lesbia – not because we lack information about them; what accounts for the difference is the poetic approach, and the ways and means they are depicted through.

Tibullus' Delia is a married woman like Lesbia. She, too, gives strong cause for jealousy and her affair with the poet ends for the same reason. However, the poet's spiritual moves in each particular situation are not so vividly expressed as they are with Catullus' poems. The latter responds immediately at the manner, voice and gestures of his beloved, and renders his feelings most ingenuously and directly, while in Tibullus' poems the image of the lady is presented indirectly – a whole set of traditional literary motifs intervene between it and the reader.

"I am the soldier of love" states Tibullus at the very start – the same way as Ovid does later. This means that love is his craft. This traditional statement tarnishes the interest towards the image of his mistress. Love appears to be an artistic intention and not a spontaneous, unforeseen emotion. For example, Catullus' extremely laconic line – *vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus* – which expresses his lust for life and the pleasure of intimacy, develops into a whole literary motif with Tibullus:

*Interea, dum fata sinunt, iungamus amores:
iam veniet tenebris Mors adoperta caput,
iam subrepet iners aetas, nec amare decebit,
dicere nec cano blanditias capite.*⁹

⁹ Tib. I, 1, 69-73.

"Let's love each other until the old age and death come" – this theme takes ten or even more lines in pentameter and develops into abstract reasoning, which relentlessly kills the expressiveness.

As for the motive "When I die, mourn over me, Delia", it has no parallel in Catullus' poems. The author of the Lesbia poems is so frankly given to either joy or sorrow that he can hardly effort such sentiments. This motif is elaborate literary-wise, and results not from an ingenuous emotion but from deep reasoning.

Such motifs abound in Tibullus' poems: the locked door of the beloved, appeals to witches for help, the motif of a matchmaker and so on.¹⁰ Their detailed overview is impossible in a concise paper; anyway, the mentioned examples are quite sufficient to throw light on its principal objective. Besides, it does not aim to assess Tibullus' poetry – the latter deserves better appreciation than the above-mentioned may suggest. The paper only aims to state that Tibullus' love story when put to verses does not present an integral emotional unity and the image of Delia is less vivid.¹¹

As regards Propertius, his poems present a slightly different picture. Similar to Tibullus, he widely uses traditional literary motifs but resorts to abstract reasoning and rhetoric to a greater degree. On the other hand, his poems abound in thoroughly elaborated love situation. In this respect, his poetry is obviously similar to Ovid's.

Propertius frequently uses the scenes of jealousy between a man and a woman that are accompanied with great deal of reasoning and rhetoric, while Catullus presents jealousy as a particular feeling provoked solely by Lesbia. He is not concerned with its general aspects. He expresses his emotional experience in purely lyrical terms while Propertius reasons a lot about jealousy. Some of the arguments are truly interesting; however, they fail to produce the lyrical impact which the author intends to do. His jealousy and even love torments often remain the rhetoric. This rightly compels to question the very existence of his beloved. Sometimes he is love's slave and sometimes its soldier, while love lyrics are his only craft. Besides, the abundance of various love situations dissolves the image of the beloved and creates the impression that it was invented only to facilitate the realization of the scenes.

Propertius' attitude to his mistress is often indifferent and ironical, which provokes the same indifference and irony in the reader. Catullus sometimes does not spare cynical words towards his love, and even pretends indifference; however, he is never either indifferent or ironic. This is simply impossible: Lesbia is the sense of his life.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 1,2, 9-30, 42- 58, 5, 47-56.

¹¹ Wheeler A. L., *Catullus and the Traditions of Ancient Poetry*, Los Angeles, 1934, 89.

One of Propertius' poems presents the following theme: At his friend's request "to yield up" Cynthia to him, the poet does not protest but warns the friend that the lady will torture him and bring him close to death. The beloved ceases to be a living being, is almost identified with a thing; and the reader's attitude is adequate.

Propertius' poems include a lot of brilliant pieces; he is the poet of exceptional talent but his Cynthia fails to make up an integral poetic image, especially the impressive one.

Ovid is another soldier of "Amore", and love is his craft – literally and not metaphorically. He wrote the encyclopedia of love all his life. The "Amores", which pictures Corinna, is its first chapter. Corinna's image, or rather the name, was composed after Catullus' poems; however, it has nothing in common with them but the motifs. For example, Ovid transforms Catullus' small piece about the death of a bird into a sizable poem in which an ordinary sparrow is naturally replaced with a motley parrot.

Ovid does not attempt to conceal the fact that Corinna is the generalized image. The poet does not try to render the genuine feeling of love. Neither love nor jealousy is painful for him; they are mere tools for his craft. He tries to describe every possible situation pertinent to love affair. However, he does not reflect the live emotion, and neither attempts to do so. His poetry abounds in rhetoric which he has studied at a professional level. To his credit be it said that he sometimes raises rhetoric to a true poetry.

Ovid is completely opposite to Catullus, who used to seek in poetry for genuine emotions and for the lines that would provoke live experience.

Ovid's feelings are expressed only in "Tristia" written at the end of his life when he suffered a real torture.

Today, the poetry of three elegists (Tibullus, Propertius and Ovid) and the images of their sweethearts have lost their appeal. Despite the high artistic quality of some of the pieces, they are regarded as the material for philological studies rather than the live sources for poetic delight. Literary motives tarnish, become obsolete and require permanent renewal while genuine emotions, if rendered in fine artistic terms, do not easily yield to changeability of time, break through the frames of a dead language and continue to live even at present. Hence, authenticity and ingenuousness is what accounts for Catullus' and his Lesbia's surprising vitality.