



Homo ludens at play with the songs of Sappho: Experiments in comparative reception theory, Part Six

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Homo ludens at play with the songs of Sappho: Experiments in comparative reception theory, Part Six

February 22, 2019 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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§0. This posting for 2019.02.22 is Part Six of a long-term project that started with Part One at [2019.01.08](#). The numbering of my paragraphs here in Part Six continues from §95 of Part Five, posted [2019.02.08](#), continuing from earlier posts. In Part Six here, I concentrate once again on the poetry of Catullus, which has been my main preoccupation in the course of this overall project ever since §53 in Part Three, posted [2019.01.25](#). This time, over forty paragraphs later, I hope to tie up some of the many loose ends that I have made for myself in pursuing the questions I face in studying the reception of Sappho by Catullus.



Clodia Metelli, the first or second daughter of the patrician Appius Claudius Pulcher and Caecilia Metella Balearica. Engraving from *Promptuarium Iconum Insigniorum*, published by Guillaume Rouillé (Lyon, 1553). [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§96. I now ask—following my best guess—the most immediate question that could be asked by those who are already familiar with the poetry of Catullus: Is the Lesbia of Catullus a cover, you could say, for a real person, namely, Clodia Metelli?

§97. To begin my answer to this question, I start with what I personally think is a certainty. Although I have consistently argued so far that the Lesbia of Catullus was modeled on Sappho as a poetic persona shaped by the poetics we see at work in the surviving songs of Sappho, I am certain that Lesbia was at the same time modeled also on a “real-life” Roman woman—just as Catullus himself was a “real-life” Roman man, not only a poetic persona. That real woman’s real name was Clodia, isometric with the poetic name Lesbia. Known short-hand as Clodia Metelli, she was the wife of Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer, and she was one of the three sisters of Publius Clodius Pulcher, who was Tribune of the People in 58 BCE. For me a most helpful guide has been a relevant book by Marilyn B. Skinner, *Clodia Metelli: The Tribune’s Sister* (2011). As Skinner notes in Chapter 7 of her book, there exists an allusion in Poem 79 of Catullus to (1) the Tribune Clodius and to (2) his sister Clodia. The wording at lines 1–2 in this poem refers to (1) a man named ‘Lesbius’ who is ostentatiously described as pulcher ‘pretty’, matching the real name of Publius Clodius Pulcher and (2) Lesbia, who is said here to prefer as her lover the pretty boy Lesbius, not Catullus.

§98. The defaming innuendo about brother-sister incest here is matched by a vitriolic verbal assault aimed personally at the real Clodia Metelli by Cicero himself in the text of his speech *Defense of Caelius*, delivered in the year 56 BCE in defense of a colorful personality by the name of Marcus Caelius Rufus. Cicero

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defames Clodia from the very start of his speech, referring to her as a meretrix 'prostitute' already in section 1 of the speech. Especially vitriolic are sections 30–38 of his text. At a later point, I will quote and translate a most revealing passage in section 36, where Cicero indulges himself in imagining an incestuous scene involving Clodia and her brother Clodius Pulcher, former Tribune of the People.

§99. For me, a reference in Poem 79 of Catullus to Clodia Metelli paired with her brother the Tribune in the guise of Lesbia paired with her pretty boy Lesbius would seem just as "real" as the undisguised reference made by Catullus elsewhere, in his Poem 49, to Marcus Tullius Cicero himself. (For some preliminary comments about Catullus 49, I refer to Wray 2001:45n29, with bibliography).

§100. At line 2 of Catullus 49, the poet calls out to Cicero in the vocative case, Marce Tulli, having playfully addressed him already at line 1 as a most eloquent nepos 'descendant' of Romulus. Then Catullus goes on to say, at lines 3–7, that he gives to Cicero the greatest thanks, and that such thanks come from Catullus as the very worst of all poets, being the worst in the same way that Cicero is the very best of all patrons. And why does Cicero deserve thanks? I think it is because Cicero is a potential patron for Catullus as poet. But, in terms of this poet's own poetics, Catullus is surely thinking of himself not as the worst of poets but rather as the very best of poets—just as Cicero, inversely, would turn out to be the very worst of patrons for a poet like our Catullus. That is what I think is implied about Cicero by the playful wording of Catullus.

§101. What I have just said about Catullus 49, I should admit right away, is hardly new: many before me have said similar things. Of lasting value, I think, is the relevant interpretation by Daniel Selden (1992:464–466), who shows that this poem can be read as an exercise in disguised sarcasm. Where I differ somewhat with others, however, is that I see a pointed contrast between what Catullus says to Cicero in his Poem 49 and what he says to Calvus in his Poem 50, which is the very next poem we read in the surviving collection of the poet's poems. I have quoted and analyzed that poem at §§75–79 in Part Four, [Nagy 2019.01.31](#).

§102. My point is, Gaius Licinius Macer Calvus the orator must have been a patron of sorts for Catullus as poet, but Marcus Tullius Cicero the orator missed his chance to become a comparable sort of patron. To put it another way, Cicero's fame in public life could have become a source of reciprocal fame for Catullus—but only if Cicero had become the sort of patron that Calvus became for the poet in Poem 50 of Catullus. As orators, Calvus as well as Cicero were prominent figures in the public world of Rome. In such a world of high-stakes negotium, Calvus would have been considered a rival of Cicero. But here is the difference: by contrast with Cicero, Calvus would be a far better patron for Catullus. And that is at least partly because Calvus would be more than a patron: as we read in Poem 50, he seems to have become a congenial friend to Catullus. Even more than that, Calvus was for Catullus a friendly rival as a poet—so much so that the love-object of Calvus in his own poetry could have been the same Lesbia who so preoccupies Catullus in Poem 51, as I also argued at §§75–79 in Part Four, [Nagy 2019.01.31](#).

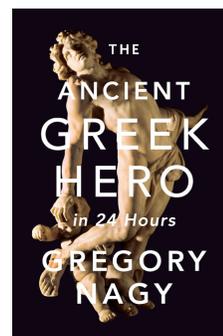
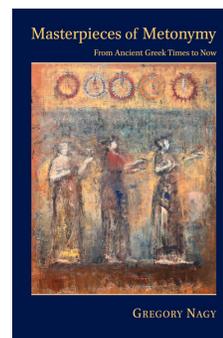
§103. By contrast with Calvus, then, Cicero does not quite seem to measure up, somehow. And I could go a bit further. This self-made nepos 'descendant' of Romulus, as Cicero is described playfully at line 1 in Poem 49 of Catullus, may not have measured up all that well as a match for Lesbia either—let me call her Lesbia, for the moment, not Clodia. Cicero may not have been all that worthy of Lesbia even at her worst, as when we see her pictured as some common prostitute who is caught in the act of servicing, in public places, the nepotes 'descendants' of Remus, as they are described at line 5 in Poem 58 of Catullus.

§104. For Cicero as a public figure, of course, the challenges of measuring up have to be viewed in terms of a different role. If he is to measure up to Calvus, he must do so not as some rival lover of Lesbia but as a rival poet—rivaling not only Catullus but also Calvus as a rival of Catullus. To become a patron of Catullus, Cicero would have to measure up as a poet.

§105. It remains to ask, however, whether this formulation is borne out by the realities of literary patronage in the era of Cicero. After quite a bit of reading around in my attempts to grasp what experts know for sure about the historical complexities of patronage in this era, I come away from the whole experience with a sense of anxiety. That is because I feel out of my depth in dealing with all the bits and pieces of evidence to be gleaned from relevant ancient texts, especially from the writings of Cicero. And my anxieties are heightened when I read some of the fierce debates that can flare up among classicists who study such writings, as we see for example by comparing the arguments we find in the book *Cicero, Catullus, and a Society of Patrons*, by Sarah Culpepper Stroup (2010), and in the review of that book, by James Zetzel (2011). That said, however, I find some comfort in an overall impression that I take away from my readings: it all boils down to some fairly simple-minded protocols of reciprocity between poet and patron—the kinds of protocols I have studied in my work on early Greek poetry, as in [Nagy 2017.09.08](#).

§106. I return here to my formulation about Cicero: he would have to measure up as a poet if he were to become a patron of Catullus the poet. Yes, he would have to measure up, but the poetry of Catullus finds him wanting, as we see from the disguised sarcasm that is built into Poem 49 of this poet. I like the way Sarah Stroup paraphrases what she thinks Catullus is really saying to Cicero in Poem 49: "Marcus, don't quit your day job." In other words, the non-job of having the otium or 'leisure' to compose poetry after your daytime work is finished does not at all suit you. You do not measure up to doing what Calvus was doing in Poem 50 of Catullus. Calvus was composing his own poetry in the company of Catullus while our poet was composing—who knows?—his Poem 51. No, dear Cicero, you should stick to your day job of public affairs, which is the negotium of orators.

§107. But Cicero still wants to be a rival of poets. He dearly wants to be poetic. Even in his public speeches, which are his day job, we could call it, he will channel poetics. My favorite example is in his *Defense of Caelius*, delivered in 56 BCE. Although Cicero addresses Clodia directly at some points in the text of this



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speech, there are other points where he shifts gears and addresses her indirectly by ventriloquizing two very different kinds of talking characters.

§107.1. The first of these two characters appears at sections 33–35 of the speech. He is staged as a stern and most censorious old man, imagined as a ghost from the hoary past. He is perhaps the most venerable of all of Clodia’s distinguished ancestors. He is Appius Claudius Caecus, who had once been Censor of Rome, in 312 BCE. This ghostly ancestor, channeled by Cicero the ventriloquist, is about to put into words his oh-so censorious disapproval of his degenerate descendant Clodia, who is at this very moment pictured in the amorous company of her middle-class lover Caelius. It is a good thing, Cicero remarks wryly at section 33, that this honorable ancestor, true to his cognomen Caecus, meaning ‘blind’, was truly blind. It is a good thing because, this way, the censorious old man can mercifully be spared from actually having to cast an eye on the sexual escapades of Clodia.

§107.2. Next, at section 36 of the speech, we see the second of the two talking characters. He is none other than Clodia’s youngest brother, Clodius, the former Tribune of the People. In this case, Cicero starts the staging of this character by imagining how Clodius must have looked when he was still a young boy. There he is, just a kid afraid of the dark and trying to escape the terrors of the night. The next thing you know, this pusio ‘little guy’ sneaks into the bed of his older sister, where the two of them comfort each other by engaging in pillow talk and beyond. The boy complains to Big Sister how jealous he is of her latest boyfriend. He is not like us swells. Why can’t you keep it in the family? You must be crazy to go out with him.

§107.3. Here I quote the relevant text directly. I start at the point where Cicero tells Clodia that he is about to shift gears, replacing the talking character of the censorious old man with an altogether different kind of talking character—someone who will be much more compatible with Clodia.

from Cicero Defense of Caelius 36:

Sin autem urbanus me agere mavis, sic agam tecum; removebo illum senem durum ac paene agrestem; ex his igitur tuis sumam aliquem ac potissimum minimum fratrem, qui est in isto genere urbanissimus; qui te amat plurimum, qui propter nescio quam, credo, timiditatem et nocturnos quosdam inanes metus tecum semper pusio cum maiore sorore cubitavit. Eum putato tecum loqui: “quid tumultuaris, soror? quid insanis? ...”

But if you [= Clodia] prefer that I [= Cicero] handle things in a more city-smart [urbanus] way, here is how I will deal with you. I will take out that old man—so rough around the edges and almost rustic—and then, I will pick instead someone belonging to the group we have right here. This someone, most preferably, is your youngest brother, who, when it comes to that kind of thing, is the most city-smart [urbanus] of them all. Why, he loves you more than anyone else. And, for whatever reason—I guess because of some kind of fearfulness, because of some empty terrors of the night—the little guy [pusio] would get into bed with you, his older sister. One can imagine him speaking to you this way: “Why are you so upset, sister? Why are you acting so crazy?...”

§107.4. This furtively intimate moment shared by Clodia and Clodius, as pruriently imagined by Cicero, reminds me of the countless secret moments of lovemaking evoked in the two “kissing poems” of Catullus, Poems 5 and 7. At lines 1–3 of Poem 5, the furtively kissing couple try to ignore the stern disapproval of censorious old men. But there the disapproval is not blind, and that is why the number of kisses has to be hidden, to avoid the evil eye of envy, as expressed by the verb *in-videre* at line 12 of Poem 5. This evil eye is also at work in the verb *fascinare* ‘cast a spell’ at line 12 of Poem 7. This verb here, as we read on at line 12, drives the malicious tongues of those who envy the pleasures of secret kisses that are beyond counting. But the countlessness of such kisses can be matched only by the countlessness of the stars that ‘see’, *vident*, line 8, all the furtive loves of mortals.

§108. I think that Cicero, in his comic staging of Clodia and Clodius as a naughty pair of infantilized lovers, is showing off here his knowledge of poetics—the poetics of Sappho herself. I further think that he seems to have in mind those songs of Sappho where the speaker stages herself as speaking with empathy to one or another of her own brothers, occasionally expressing to them her empathy with their various and sundry sexual needs. To introduce what I have to say about such poetics, I refer to my essay [Nagy 2015.10.01](#), starting at §4, where I also highlight my explanation of the name Sapphō as actually meaning ‘sister’.

§109. If I am right in seeing here an allusion made by Cicero himself to the poetics of Sappho, then it might also be right for me to see Lesbia as a poetic character who fits the real Clodia Metelli not only in the poetry of Catullus but even in the would-be poetic thinking of Cicero. Thinking poetic thoughts, our orator has seized an opportunity to show off his familiarity with the songs of Sappho herself.

§110. In the Latin texts that have survived from the ancient world, the earliest overt reference to Clodia Metelli as the real woman who appeared in the guise of Lesbia in the poems of Catullus is found in section 10 of the so-called Apologia of Apuleius, who flourished in the second century CE. What seems to go mostly unnoted about this passage is that, at an earlier point, in section 9 of the Apologia, Apuleius is saying that Sappho, to whom he refers simply as ‘the woman from Lesbos’, Lesbia, should be considered an acceptable model for erotic poetry, just as his own poetry addressed to pretty boys should be considered such a model. From the context of the references made by Apuleius here, it is clear that the eroticism of the poetry that he defends is not to be considered obscene. But here is a relevant question: why, then, is there so much obscenity attached to Lesbia in some poems of Catullus? Is it because of the obscenity that sticks

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like glue to the historical referent, Clodia? Or is it because of something that is inherent in poetics involving women where such poetics are appropriated by men? I will address such questions in Part Seven.



Wall painting from the Caupona of Salvius at Pompeii, now in the Archaeological Museum, Naples, inv. 111482. After a drawing in Emil Presuhn, *Die pompejanischen wanddecorationen. Für künstler und kunstgewerbeschulen, sowie freunde des alterthums herausgegeben*, Abt. V (unnumbered plate). Leipzig, 1877.

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