

Article

Desire, Agency and the Divine in Catullus and Contemporary Philosophy

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Abstract

Catullus invokes the love gods Venus and Cupid/Amor some twenty times within the relatively exiguous corpus of his surviving poems. On occasion, their names seem to be little more than metonyms for love, desire or sexual attractiveness; but the modern reader may wonder what we should make of apparently more personalized references, such as the allusion to the ‘two-faced goddess’ in poem 68, or—still more so—the despairing appeal to the gods in general that concludes poem 76. To what extent do the poems presuppose the existence of personal deities who exert control over human affairs? Or are the traditional divine names mere *façons de parler*, serving only as vehicles for the representation of what we would call emotions or drives? This article approaches these questions from two interrelated perspectives. Catullus’ poetry is contextualized within the intellectual currents of his era, as represented in the works of Cicero and Lucretius, both of whom are—in rather different ways—sceptical as regards traditional modes of representing the divine, but also testify to the persistence and continuing importance of the beliefs that they critique. Against this background, I consider two conflicting models of love and desire with which Catullus can be seen to operate: as a freely chosen *foedus* (‘pact’), for which the human partners are fully responsible; and as a divinely inflicted disease, against which the mortal sufferer has no recourse except prayer. This latter, more traditional model, I will suggest, reflects persisting ways of thinking about desire and the other passions, to which both Epicureanism and Stoicism are opposed.

Keywords: love; sexual desire; emotions; Catullus; Cicero; Lucretius; Venus; Amor

What are emotions and where do they come from? At least as regards love and desire (*erōs*), the archaic Greek poets had a clear-cut answer: they are sent by the gods, Aphrodite (goddess of love and beauty) and her son Eros (the god of desire). Lyric poetry, in particular, represents erotic desire as an external, invasive force, in the face of which the subject is more or less helpless: Sappho characterizes Eros as an ‘unmanageable creature’ that ‘loosens the limbs’ of its victim (a phrase elsewhere associated with faintness and death), and memorably describes the overwhelming bodily impact of a glimpse of the beloved, which renders her momentarily deaf, dumb, blind and close to dying.¹ Other archaic poets liken Eros to a blacksmith who pounds the speaker with his hammer and plunges him into an icy torrent, or to a ferocious north wind that shakes the mind to its core.² The force of desire is both violent and inaccessible to rational thought: in the words of Claude Calame, ‘the power of Eros cancels out all ability to understand or to make decisions’ (Calame 1999, p. 19). And the pain inextricably intertwined with love’s sweetness can be alleviated only with the assistance of Aphrodite, who—if well-disposed towards the lover—may either grant fulfilment or release her votary from suffering. Sappho enlists the goddess as an ‘ally’, and pleads that she ‘release her from hard cares’ (1.25–8 Voigt); Theognis similarly



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asks Aphrodite to free him from suffering now that his youth is past, and rejoices that she has enabled him to fall out of love with a beautiful boy (1323–26, 1337–40).

Catullus, writing some five hundred years later in the very different milieu of late-Republican Rome, is the inheritor of this literary tradition. His admiration for Sappho is clear, both from his close translation of fr. 31 Voigt in poem 51 (as well as less overt echoes elsewhere in his collection) and from the pseudonym Lesbia, ‘woman of Lesbos’, that he bestows upon his beloved.³ But we are entitled to ask to what extent he shares the earlier poet’s understanding of desire and its aetiology. Catullus invokes Venus and Cupid/Amor, the Roman equivalents of Greek Aphrodite and Eros, some twenty times: to what extent, however, do the poems presuppose the existence of personal deities who exert control over human affairs? Or are the traditional divine names mere *façons de parler*, serving only as vehicles for the representation of purely human affective states?

Catullus’ understanding of both desire and the divine will undoubtedly have been conditioned by the development—between Sappho’s day and his own—of philosophical perspectives on these issues, as well as the prominent interest amongst Hellenistic poets in the psychology of erotic obsession.⁴ Already in Hellenistic epigram, we can find suggestions of a clash between philosophical ideals of moderation or self-control and literary representations of *erōs* as an irresistible force: most explicitly, the epigrammatist Posidippus enjoins the Stoic philosophers Zeno and Cleanthes to be silent while he deals with the theme of ‘bittersweet Eros’ (*Palatine Anthology* 5.134 = *Epigram* 1 Gow-Page).⁵ I will argue in what follows that Catullus’ poetry implicitly stages a similar clash between philosophical ideals and the experience of *amor*: the poet, I suggest, both takes on board and ultimately rejects philosophical rationalizations of emotion as something that lies—or should lie—within the willed control of the individual.

1. Desire in Hellenistic Philosophy

We are fortunate to have closely contemporary accounts of Epicurean and Stoic ethical and theological doctrine in the writings of Lucretius and Cicero. While the two schools are in many respects diametrically opposed—not least in their conceptualization of the divine—they share an emphasis on self-control and the importance of regulating our emotions and desires. Cicero (in *Tusculan Disputations* 4) and Lucretius (particularly in the ‘diatribe’ against romantic love at the end of *De Rerum Natura* 4) offer analyses of love and sexual desire as phenomena fully explicable on the human level—as Lucretius puts it, ‘the force of a human being alone can summon up human seed from another human’ (*ex homine humanum semen ciet una hominis uis*, *Lucr.* 4.1040)⁶—and deny any role to the gods in the causation or experience of these affects. The very emphasis, however, that both writers lay on the non-involvement of the gods suggests that divine intervention remains available to their contemporary readers as an explanation for the onset of desire, and as a means of managing it or freeing oneself from the painful feelings accompanying unrequited or otherwise unhappy love.⁷

It should be emphasized that the denial of divine involvement in the emotions is not a matter of atheism.⁸ The Epicurean gods are exemplary figures, embodying perfect tranquillity, who cannot therefore have anything to do with the control of our world or human affairs, which would inevitably compromise their peace of mind (Epicurus, *Letter to Meneceus* 123–4, *Principal Doctrines* 1; *Lucr.* 1.44–49 = 2.646–51, 2.1090–1104). The Stoics (whose theory of the emotions Cicero is explicitly adopting in *Tusculans* 3 and 4)⁹ conceptualized god, in contrast, as an all-pervasive fiery spirit (*pneuma*), also identified with both Providence and unmitigated rationality: emotion, as the antithesis of reason in the Stoic system,¹⁰ is thus fundamentally opposed to divinity, though ultimately (like everything in the universe), under the control of Fate.¹¹ Accordingly, Lucretius and Cicero

seek to redefine the role of the divine without denying the existence of the gods or the importance of traditional cult practice.¹² In this respect, both appear not atypical of their age and social class: the Roman elite of the Late Republic was, as Katharina Volk puts it, ‘saturated in philosophy’ (Volk 2021, p. 55); but in general the tendency for members of the upper classes appears to have been to accommodate their philosophical views to Roman religious tradition, reinterpreting religious ritual and belief in the light of their intellectual affiliations rather than seeking to reform or—still less—abandon ancestral practice.¹³

For both Lucretius and Cicero, then, emotions are essentially cognitive processes, which—crucially—lie, or should lie, under human control. Cicero quotes with withering scorn from poets, particularly the comedians Caecilius and Turpilius, who depict the lover as the passive victim of the god ‘in whose power it is to choose who shall be mad, who sane, who shall be healed, and who shall sink into disease’ (*cui in manu sit, quem esse dementem velit, | quem sapere, quem sanari*,¹⁴ *quem in morbum inici*, Tusc. 4.68, citing Caecilius fr. inc. 8 Maltby and Slater = 259–64R³; cf. Tusc. 4.73). Poetry in general (including that of the lyric poets Alcaeus, Anacreon and Ibycus, 4.71) is similarly taken to task for giving *Amor*—‘the source of disgraceful and frivolous behaviour’—a place amongst the gods ([*poetica*] *quae amorem flagitii et levitatis auctorem in concilio deorum conlocandum putet*, 4.69).

Lucretius is less explicit but no less devastating in his dismissal of the idea that sexual desire might lie under divine control.¹⁵ Perhaps rather surprisingly, the names Venus and Cupid crop up repeatedly in the finale to Book 4, connecting this section of the poem to the famous Hymn to Venus at the beginning of Book 1, where the goddess is represented as inspiring non-human animals with the pleasurable desire to reproduce their kind (Lucr. 1.14–20). In retrospect, however, the Venus of the proem may be interpreted as a personification or metonym—a poetic technique that Lucretius is at pains to justify ‘provided that one refrain from polluting one’s mind with vile superstition’ by taking such imagery too literally, and supposing that the blessed gods have any interest or involvement in human life or experience (2.655–60). Accordingly, Venus is rigorously demythologized at the beginning of the attack on romantic or passionate love: the (so-called) ‘darts of Venus’ are in reality no more nor less than the visual images (*simulacra*) that flow from an attractive boy or woman and stimulate the concentration of semen in the genitalia.¹⁶ This mechanical process, Lucretius concludes, is what causes sexual desire and—if the individual perversely fixates on one specific sexual object—the pain of passionate love (Lucr. 4.1037–72). This, then, is we call Venus and Amor or Cupid:

namque voluptatem praesagit muta cupido.

haec Venus est nobis; hinc autemst nomen Amoris (Lucr. 4.1057–58)¹⁷

For dumb desire (*cupido/Cupido*) foresees pleasure [sc. in the sexual act]. This is our Venus; from here is derived the name of love (*amor/Amor*).

The phrasing implies that Venus and Cupid/Amor are no more than metonyms for sexual pleasure and sexual desire, and this is accordingly how the names are used throughout the finale: *Venus* represents the sexual act or sexual pleasure, and in particular the ‘snare’ of misguided craving for sex with an idealized beloved, which inevitably eventuates in the acute psychological distress of unfulfilled desire (4.1089–1104).¹⁸ While Lucretius represents deluded lovers, or the childless, as turning to the gods in the hope of assistance—again, suggesting that such behaviours and underlying ideas of divine causality were commonplace—he makes it clear that these practices are at best futile: it is humans, ‘blinded by desire’, who bring the inevitable pain of erotic obsession upon themselves (4.1153), and sterility is caused by incompatibilities between male and female seed, not by ‘divine powers’ (4.1233–59, esp. 1236–39 *quod plerumque putant et multo sanguine ... conspergunt aras ... nequiquam*, ‘as many believe, and spray the altars with plentiful blood—for nothing’).

Conversely, both Cicero and Lucretius insist that it is within our power to bring love, or desire, like other emotions, under our control. To reiterate, Stoics and Epicureans alike conceptualize emotions as, in essence, cognitive processes. Epicurus probably understood emotions, like desires, as either ‘natural’ or ‘empty’: ‘natural’ desires are those that aim at a concrete and specific end, in accordance with our instinctive disposition towards pleasure, and are therefore able to be fulfilled, thus conducing to the Epicurean goal of *ataraxia* or mental tranquillity; those that are ‘empty’ are based on false beliefs, and therefore can never be fulfilled.¹⁹ Emotions, conceptualized as psychic disturbances and thus as inherently painful—something, of course, to be avoided according to Epicurus, for whom pleasure is the supreme good—may nevertheless be entertained for the sake of a greater, long-term good: anger, for example, may be a reasonable reaction to a genuine harm which compromises the individual’s freedom from pain and distress. But *empty* anger—anger roused by something that is not a genuine harm—is something we must guard against in our pursuit of *ataraxia*. In this sense, judgements are intimately bound up with emotion: ‘empty’ emotions can be removed by the realization that the thing we perceive as having harmed or about to harm us, or as desirable, is not in reality detrimental (and thus a source of fear or anger) or beneficial (and thus to be desired, or productive of delight). Crucial, according to Epicurus, is ‘sober reasoning’ (*nēphōn logismos*, *Letter to Menoeceus* 132), which should enable us to choose correctly amongst the objects we should pursue or avoid in life. Love, on Lucretius’ analysis, is—as we have seen—the misdirection of our natural sexual desires to one individual, which can be understood in turn as a mistaken belief that that individual is indispensable to our happiness: accordingly, Lucretius recommends promiscuity, redirection of the mind to other objects (4.1068–72) or reflection on the fact that there are other fish in the sea and that we lived happily before meeting the beloved (4.1173) as cures for erotic obsession. Equally important is accurate perception of the beloved or object of desire: by idealizing her,²⁰ he argues, we create a trap for ourselves (4.1149–52), misjudging her as a godlike being with the power to confer happiness and remove the pain of lack. Clear-sighted assessment of the beloved’s true qualities should enable us to free ourselves from this snare: at the end of a lengthy satirical passage in which Lucretius mocks lovers’ wilful blindness to the imperfections of the beloved, and depicts women as taking care to maintain the illusion by concealing what he calls the ‘backstage activities of life’ (1186), the poet concludes:

tu animo tamen omnia possis

protrahere in lucem . . .

et, si bello animos et non odiosa, vicissim

praetermittere <et> humanis concedere rebus. (Lucr. 4.1188–91)

Nevertheless, in your mind’s eye you could drag all this into the light of day . . .

and, if she has a good temper and is not hateful, let it pass in turn and yield to human imperfection.

A kind of deromanticized ‘love’, founded on an accurate assessment of the woman’s character and behaviour, will ideally follow, we might understand these lines to suggest—but, crucially, it will not involve the agitation and distress that Lucretius has argued are characteristic even of requited love that is based ultimately on self-delusion and error of judgement.²¹

Cicero, more explicitly still, insists that emotions ‘arise out of judgements and opinions and are voluntary’ (*oriuntur ex iudiciis opinionum et voluntatibus*, *Tusc.* 4.82).²² At *Tusculans* 4.11–14, he summarizes the Stoic theory that there are four basic types or genera of emotion: distress, consisting in ‘a fresh opinion that an evil is present in which one thinks it is right to lower and contract the mind’, fear (a similar ‘opinion’ pertaining to future evil), gladness

(‘an opinion that a good is present’) and desire (a similar ‘opinion’ in relation to the future). The Stoic wise person, who always behaves in accordance with reason, will hold such ‘opinions’ only when the thing present or in prospect is genuinely good or bad, and will therefore experience only versions of the emotions that are fully rational, what the Stoics called *eupatheiai* or in Cicero’s terminology *constantiae*, ‘consistencies’. The corollary of this cognitivist position is that emotions are ‘voluntary’ or ‘within our power’, *voluntariae* (4.65, 76, 79, 83): it is possible to bring them under control, and ultimately free ourselves completely from their irrational manifestations, simply by correcting our erroneous beliefs. Cicero’s cures for erotic love are thus much like those prescribed by Lucretius: distraction, emphasis on the negative consequences attendant on desire and—above all—‘mak[ing] clear to [the lover] the nature of the thing he desires, how slight, how contemptible, how completely worthless it is, and how easily one can get it somewhere else or in some other way, or else do without it altogether’ (*haec adhibenda curatio est, ut et illud quod cupiat ostendatur quam leve, quam contemnendum, quam nihili sit omnino, quam facile vel aliunde vel alio modo perfici vel omnino neglegi possit, Tusc. 4.74*).²³ In short, what we might loosely call a ‘talking cure’ is, or should be, sufficient to free us of irrational fears and desires.

It is worth emphasizing, in this connection, that Lucretius and Cicero, in common with other Hellenistic and Roman philosophers, understand the primary purpose of philosophy to be therapeutic: as Epicurus puts it, ‘vain is the word of the philosopher by which no human suffering is cured’ (fr. 221 Usener). Lucretius, accordingly, represents his poem in a famous simile as a medicinal draft, designed to release our minds from the ‘tight bonds of religion’ (1.931–50 = 4.6–25), and elsewhere depicts Epicurean philosophy as freeing its disciples from the torment of anxiety and insatiable desire.²⁴ The *Tusculans* is presented still more explicitly as a work designed to heal its reader: in particular, the proem to Book 3 (3.1–6) develops an extended analogy between the treatment of bodily ailments by medical science and the treatment of psychic ‘ailments’, such as distress (*aegritudo*) and desire (*cupiditas*), by philosophy.²⁵ Both Lucretius and Cicero, then, offer not just an analysis of the nature of love, amongst other emotions, but crucially the means to manage it—not by enlisting the help of the gods, but through the application of reasoned argument.

2. Desire in Catullus 51: Lyric Passion and Philosophical Agency

Against this background, Catullus’ representation of love can be seen to approach the demythologized understanding of emotion as something ‘within our control’ advanced by Lucretius and Cicero, only to veer away to a more traditional view, ultimately rejecting the promise of philosophical therapy held out by his two contemporaries. An obvious starting point is poem 51, largely a close translation of the Sappho fragment (31 Voigt) mentioned above. Strikingly, however, the fourth stanza of Catullus’ poem acts as a kind of coda, in which the speaker turns from addressing his beloved Lesbia to reprimand himself: this stanza corresponds to nothing in Sappho’s original Greek, and appears crucial to the interpretation of the poem:²⁶

otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est:

otio exsultas nimiumque gestis:

otium et reges prius et beatas

perdidit urbes. (Catullus 51.13–16)

Leisure, Catullus, is your problem: at leisure you grow overexcited and run riot;
before now, leisure has been the downfall of kings and wealthy cities.

Catullus’ self-depiction here coincides quite strikingly with Lucretius’ portrayal of the unhappy lover who feels the pricks of conscience when he realizes that he is wasting his youth in idleness and debauchery (*cum conscius ipse animus se forte remordet | desidiöse agere*

aetatem lustrisque perire, 4.1135–36).²⁷ It has often been noted, too, that the vocabulary of this final stanza coincides with language used by Lucretius and (especially) Cicero in their analysis of the passions. A recurring phrase in the *Tusculans* and *De Finibus* is *voluptas* or *laetitia gestiens*, that is, uncontrolled or wildly excessive happiness, in contrast to the calm and rational joy experienced by the wise man. In three passages (*Tusc.* 4.13, 4.66 and 5.16), the relatively uncommon verb *gestire* ('be excited') is combined with *exsultare* ('run riot') in characterizing emotion as a state of damaging psychophysical arousal: as Franco Bellandi and others have emphasized, Catullus' phrase *exsultas nimiumque gestis* (51.14) sounds remarkably similar.²⁸ Both verbs occur in similarly salient contexts in Lucretius: in the attack on *amor* in the finale to Book 4, the 'wound' of desire is characterized as a wild desire (*gestit . . . coire*, 1055) to expel semen into the body that has caused the lover's arousal, while *exsulto* is used, not of erotic excitement, but of fear, at 3.141, where it is applied to the 'leaping' of the heart under the influence of panic or terror.²⁹ Tellingly, Lucretius goes on just a few lines later to draw on the same poem of Sappho that Catullus translates, in describing the symptoms of someone undergoing what we might call a panic attack.³⁰

In the final stanza of poem 51, then, we might understand Catullus as taking a step back from the Sapphic conceptualization of erotic desire as an overwhelming psychophysical force assaulting the lover from without, and contemplating his emotions in a more philosophical light.³¹ Particularly in view of the fact that—as noted above—both Lucretius and Cicero suggest turning the attention elsewhere as a possible cure for *amor*, the lexical similarities between the speaker's self-admonition against succumbing to the lures of *otium* ('leisure') and the strictures of both Lucretius and Cicero against giving way to intense emotion may encourage us (without necessarily positing a direct intertextual connection)³² to read the final stanza in terms of contemporary philosophical discourse—an interpretative strategy that arguably receives further support from another addition that Catullus makes to his Sapphic model in the poem's opening lines:

ille mi par esse deo videtur
 ille, si fas est, superare divos
 qui sedens adversus identidem te
 spectat et audit. . . (Catullus 51.1–4)

That man seems to me to be equal to a god, or, if it is not impious to say so, to surpass the gods, who, sitting face to face, constantly looks at and listens to you. . .

Where Sappho begins with her own feelings (*phainetai moi*, '[he] seems to me'), postponing the demonstrative pronoun *keinos*, 'that man', to the third word of her line, Catullus puts the other man, *ille*, in the emphatic position as the poem's first word, and goes on to amplify this change of emphasis by the addition of his second line, which has no direct counterpart in Sappho. The repetition of *ille*, and the hyperbolic claim that the other is not only godlike but actually surpasses the gods, turns this—as several critics have observed—from a description of erotic desire into one in which desire is mingled with jealousy and masculine rivalry (see, e.g., Greene (1999), Clark (2008)). But the doubling of the reference to the gods, underlined by the 'pious formula' *si fas est*, 'if it is not impious to say so', also throws emphasis onto the notion of godlikeness—one that acquires considerable prominence in philosophical discourse from Plato onwards.

Where, for Sappho, 'godlikeness' probably connotes superhuman strength—one would have to be a god to resist the girl's overpowering attractions—by the first century BC it had acquired more specific associations with the transcendent wisdom and/or virtue of the sage.³³ In Hellenistic philosophy, the ideal of *homoiōsis theōi*, or 'becoming godlike', is perhaps most prominently associated with Epicurus, whose followers notoriously honoured him as a god after his death: Lucretius proclaims in so many words *deus ille fuit*

(‘he was a god’, 5.8). But both Epicureans and Stoics claimed that the happiness of the wise person generally puts him (or, at least for the Epicureans, her) on a par with Jupiter or the gods in general.³⁴ This idea too crops up in both Lucretius and Cicero, in relation in either case to the wise person’s immunity to strong emotion.

Thus, Lucretius assures us that although an irascible temperament (for example) is a function of the physical make-up the *anima* or soul, we can train ourselves to resist such propensities to the extent that nothing prevents us from living ‘a life worthy of the gods’ (*dignam dis degere uitam*, 3.322). Cicero’s Stoic speakers, similarly, equate the life governed by reason with that of the gods. The (philosophically) happy life, *uita beata*, is *par et similis deorum* (‘equal to and like that of the gods’, *De Natura Deorum* 2.153); the human being is a ‘mortal god’ (*quasi mortalem deum*, *De Finibus* 2.40); and, in the Stoicizing mood of the *Tusculans*, Cicero asserts *in propria persona* that the human mind is both derived from and can properly be compared with god (*Tusc.* 5.38–39). Perhaps coincidentally, in this last passage we find a variation of the same exculpatory formula, *si hoc fas est dictu* (‘if it is not impious to say so’), as is used by Catullus. Importantly for our purposes, in all these passages it is human *rationality*, the antithesis of the passions in the Stoic system, that brings us close to god.³⁵

Catullus’ godlike man appears similarly free of passion: unlike the speaker, who is annihilated by a mere glance, he seems completely self-possessed as he ‘continually’ (*identidem*, 3, another addition to Sappho) gazes at and listens to the sweetly laughing Lesbia. But the hyperbolic phrasing of the second line may point away from the philosophical ideal of godlikeness a more colloquial, vernacular conception of divine bliss. In particular, the exuberant excess of Catullus’ diction is reminiscent of the absurd, though not unsympathetic young lovers of Roman comedy: Phaedromus in Plautus’ *Curculio*, for example, rapturously exclaims ‘I’m in heaven!’ (literally, ‘I’m a god’, *sum deus!*, 167) as his beloved emerges from the house.³⁶ An even closer parallel is *Pseudolus* 328, where the pimp who owns our hero’s beloved is in the lover’s eyes ‘a much mightier Jupiter than Jupiter’ (*hic mihi nunc est multo potior Iuppiter quam Iuppiter*). These passages suggest a different way of interpreting Catullus’ *makarismos*: ‘that man’ is godlike not so much in his self-possession, but in his felicity, owing to his proximity to Lesbia (as, presumably, the speaker would be too, if the positions were reversed). But this interpretation seems very much at odds with the philosophical reading, and indeed precisely inverts the use of comedy by Cicero and (less explicitly) Lucretius, who are concerned to point up the lover’s absurdity, if not downright insanity.³⁷ Where Cicero quotes directly from comedy, Lucretius introduces a typical comic scenario, that of the *exclusus amator*—the lover locked out by his beloved and protesting his devotion on her doorstep—to illustrate the wilful self-delusion in which people indulge themselves when in love (4.1174–84).³⁸ It is in this context that Lucretius uses the phrase ‘backstage activities of life’ (*vitae post scaenia*, 4.1186), quoted above, implicitly gesturing towards the scene’s comic origins. Catullus, in contrast, seeks—it seems—to recuperate the comic lover’s plight, casting himself in the starring role, not in mockery but in all seriousness. Whereas Cicero and Lucretius exploit the young lover’s ridiculous excesses as a means to reinforce the philosophical ideal of rational self-control, Catullus assimilates himself to such figures as Phaedria in Terence’s *Eunuchus*, who is fully conscious of his own distressing emotions but clings to them nevertheless (*Eun.* 72–73 *prudens sciens | vivos vidensque pereo*, ‘in full consciousness and awareness of what I’m doing, alive and awake, I’m dying [of love]’).

Ultimately, poem 51 seems open to, or poised between, what we might call philosophical and anti-philosophical readings. Is the speaker unhappy (*misero*, 5) because of his inability to resist the effects of passion, or merely because he is not (yet) in Lesbia’s favour? How fully is he committed to the self-admonition of the final stanza, with its

philosophically tinged analysis of leisure and emotion? In this sense, the framing of the poem may be seen to toy with Stoic and Epicurean ideas of autarky, self-control and *ataraxia*, but to hold these in balance with the antithetical promise of divine bliss conferred by the beloved, with all the wild excesses of emotion that that would entail.

3. Catullan Amor: Furor or Foedus?

At the early point in the fragmented narrative of his relationship with Lesbia represented by poem 51, then, Catullus seems open both to the Sapphic model of desire as an external, invasive force, and to a more philosophical idealization of the serenity embodied in the other man in the love triangle of the opening stanza. These alternatives can be correlated, I suggest, with two prominent strands in Catullus' representation of love and sexual desire in general. On the one hand, Catullus adopts the traditional understanding of these affects as manifestations of divine intervention in human life, depicting the lover's experience (like Sappho) as one of helpless subjection to the violent and irresistible onslaught of Aphrodite/Venus and Eros/Cupid. On the other, *amor* is strikingly presented in several poems as a freely chosen bond or alliance, comparable to male–male friendship and entailing analogous commitments and responsibilities. The clash between these two perspectives is largely subliminal, but comes to a head, I will argue, in poem 76, where Catullus can be seen in the last analysis to reject the philosophical perspective and its promise of a rationally based therapy for the emotions.³⁹

The first of these perspectives is most evident in the epyllion or 'miniature epic' poem 64, where Catullus—perhaps not surprisingly—draws on the language and imagery of earlier epic poetry in portraying the fierce and painful love of Ariadne for Theseus.⁴⁰ Ariadne's emotions are overwhelming, like a fire or the waves of the sea; and their origin is traced to Venus and Cupid, who 'sow thorny cares' in her breast (64.72) and 'inflict madness with pitiless heart' (64.94).⁴¹ But Catullus uses markedly similar language of his own plight elsewhere in the collection, notably in poem 68 (or 68a and b—the unity of the poem or poems is much disputed). The 'two-faced goddess' (*duplex Amathusia*) who 'mingles sweet bitterness with cares' (*quae dulcem curis miscet amaritatem*) is identified as the source of his passion at 68.17–18 and 51–52; and both the speaker and his mythical analogue Laodamia are portrayed as 'blazing' with passion (68.52–54 and 73). Echoes between Ariadne's speech and those of the speaker *in propria persona* elsewhere in the collection reinforce the connection, to the extent that the epyllion has sometimes been described as 'auto-allegory', with Ariadne serving as a kind of mask for the poet (see esp. Putnam (1961)). While we may reject such a reading as over-schematic, the parallels are undeniable—most notably, Ariadne's denunciation of the desiring man as untrustworthy and duplicitous (64.143–48: *nunc iam nulla viro iuranti femina credat*, etc., 'now indeed no woman should believe a man's promises . . .') precisely inverts the Catullan lover's suspicious reaction to Lesbia's promises at 70.3–4 (*sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti | in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua*, 'what a woman says to her eager lover should be written on the wind and running water').

The language of fire and madness, and references to Venus and Cupid, recur periodically throughout the collection. Catullus calls himself 'insane' in his desire for an infinite number of kisses at 7.10; looking back in poem 100 from a period after the relationship has ended, he describes himself as 'scorched by a crazy flame' (*cum vesana meas torreret flamma medullas*, 100.7). Similarly, the lover of his friend Caecilius is 'dying of unconquerable love' (*deperit impotente amore*) at 35.12, and Venus and Cupid are said to have bestowed a mysterious perfume (a metaphor for irresistible allure?) on Catullus' girl at 13.11–12. In more light-hearted vein, Cupid is represented as 'sneezing' his approval of the happy couple Acme and Septimius in the repeated refrain of poem 45.

Conversely, the epigrams (69–116) in particular construct an innovative ideal of love as a *foedus amicitiae* or ‘bond of friendship’ (109.6), based on reciprocal trust and goodwill and ideally lasting for life. Here, as D. O. Ross demonstrated in a ground-breaking study, Catullus draws extensively on the paradigm and the language of male–male friendship, an important social ideal in Roman elite culture.⁴² The vocabulary of ‘aristocratic obligation’ is strikingly redeployed from the homosocial to the heterosexual sphere, articulating a novel conception of love as a ‘duty’ or ‘bond’ (*officium, foedus*) in which both parties are morally obligated to respond to the receipt of *benefacta* or ‘good deeds’. *Amor*, moreover, is represented as more than (mere) physical attraction, embracing sentiments of ‘affection’ or ‘goodwill’ (*benevolentia*) which are likewise traditionally more at home in the context of male friendship.⁴³

Friendship, however, was not only a Roman aristocratic ideal, but also one highly valorized in Stoic and Epicurean philosophy. As Epicurus puts it, ‘of the things which wisdom provides for the blessedness of one’s whole life, by far the greatest is the possession of friendship’ (*Principal Doctrines* 27, tr. Inwood and Gerson). Lucretius accordingly declares that he is happy to undertake the labour of writing his poem in hopes of ‘the pleasure of delightful friendship’ with his dedicatee, Memmius (Lucr. 1.140–41). The Stoics, too, idealized friendship as a kind of community of the wise, an idea also developed at length by Cicero in his treatise *De Amicitia*, in which he repeatedly asserts that true friendship exists only amongst the virtuous.⁴⁴

In Catullus’ case, however, this model is clearly in tension with the more traditional understanding of *amor* outlined above. Whereas love or desire may be thought of as an external, invasive force, friendship is a purely human affair. Cicero, indeed, argues that we should exercise great care in choosing our friends (*De Amicitia* 62–64, 85), suggesting a relationship over which we have, or should ideally have, complete control. Catullus’ phrase *foedus amicitiae* (‘bond of friendship’, 109.6) has particular resonance with a passage in Lucretius’ account of human prehistory at the end of Book 5 of the *De Rerum Natura*. Here, in describing the formation of the social contract, Lucretius imagines early humans as *voluntarily* coming together, in the reasonable belief that a pact of mutual non-aggression offers the best chance of survival for their women and children. As the poet puts it, ‘then neighbours began to join in friendship with each other in their eagerness not to harm or be harmed’ (*tunc et amicitiam coeperunt iungere amantes | finitimi inter se nec laedere nec violari*, 5.1019–20); a few lines later, these agreements are described as a *foedera* (1025). Here, the emphasis is clearly on the voluntary nature of the pacts as well as the mutual obligation that they impose: similarly, the *foedus amicitiae* to which Catullus aspires with Lesbia will be mutual (*hunc nostrum inter nos*, ‘this love of ours that we share’, 109.2) and demands a willed commitment from both lovers (*id sincere dicat et ex animo*, ‘may she say this sincerely and from the heart’, 109.4)—though, perhaps paradoxically, the speaker calls on the gods to ensure that Lesbia means what she says.

The ideal of mutuality brings us back to the finale to Lucretius 4, and the contrast explored earlier between the self-delusion of the passionate lover and the kind of disillusioned or demystified relationship that Lucretius seems to approve and perhaps even recommend. While the phrase *ex animo*, ‘from the heart’, is not an unusual one, it is striking that it appears in the context of (potential) erotic deception in both authors. Whereas Catullus hopes for sincerity and mutuality in his *foedus* with Lesbia, Lucretius asserts that women are not always deceivers in the erotic context—deriving pleasure from sex as they do, no less than their male partners. ‘A woman does not always sigh with feigned love [in sexual intercourse] . . . but often does this sincerely [*ex animo*] in pursuit of shared pleasure’ (*nec mulier semper ficto suspirat amore | . . . | nam facit ex animo saepe et communia quaerens | gaudia . . .*, 4.1192–96). Coming as it does immediately after the satirical account of the

locked-out lover discussed above, this points to a more positive ideal of sexual pleasure, in which each partner recognizes the other for what they are, and avoids the pitfalls of jealousy, possessiveness and the impossible desire for total fusion outlined in the attack on romantic love. Catullus, in contrast, seems doubtful that his ideal is genuinely feasible: the insistent accumulation of terms denoting sincerity (*vere*, ‘truly’, *sincere*, ‘sincerely’, *ex animo*, ‘from the heart’), in combination with the optative form of the couplet, conveys more than a hint of suspicion that *this* woman is indeed faking it.⁴⁵

Poem 109 can in fact be seen as the culmination of a sequence of epigrams in which Catullus expresses doubts as to Lesbia’s sincerity, and/or laments the failure of his erotic ideal: it is striking that the terminology of ‘aristocratic obligation’ appears almost exclusively in the context of its betrayal.⁴⁶ In the paired poems 70 and 72, for example, Catullus first voices his scepticism about the truthfulness of ‘a woman’s words to her eager lover’,⁴⁷ and then (apparently after the lapse of some time: *dilexi tum te*, ‘I loved you then’) goes on to contrast his current sense of disillusion with his former feelings for her:

nunc te cognovi: quare etsi impensius uror,
multo mi tamen es vilior et levior.
qui potis est, inquis? quod amantem iniuria talis
cogit amare magis, sed bene velle minus. (Cat. 72.5–8)

Now I know what you’re really like: so that although I burn more fiercely, you are much cheaper and more lightweight in my eyes. How can this be, you ask? Because such ill-treatment compels a lover to desire more, but to feel less goodwill.

Here, the traditional lyric image repertoire of desire (‘I burn more fiercely’) collides with the code of aristocratic male reciprocity suggested by *bene velle* (‘to feel goodwill’): Catullus represents himself, like the Ciceronian and Lucretian lover, as disillusioned by the contrast between his ideal and the reality of Lesbia’s character (*nunc te cognovi*, ‘now I know what you’re really like’) and behaviour (*iniuria talis*, ‘such ill-treatment’). But this poem strikingly inverts the effect of the philosophers’ prescription for the treatment of desire—far from freeing Catullus of his passion, disillusion only intensifies it (*impensius uror*, ‘I burn more fiercely’).

The narrative of self-delusion and disillusion is developed more fully in the complex and experimental poem 68 (or 68b), in which the poet recalls what seems to be his first assignation with Lesbia. I noted above that the onset of desire is described here in violent language reminiscent of archaic lyric: ‘two-faced Amathusia [i.e., Venus]’ sets the lover ablaze, with a flame like the fires that burn within Mount Etna (68.51–53). Catullus paints an idealized picture of Lesbia as she arrives at the house where the lovers are to meet, as a ‘radiant goddess’ (*candida diva*, 70), assimilated to Venus herself (Cupid flits around her as she sets her foot on the threshold, 133–34). So, too, the Lucretian lover idealizes his girl as a goddess: *Veneres nostras*, ‘our Venuses’ at 4.1185 is surely focalized through the self-deluding lover, as is the line (immediately preceding the satirical portrait of the ‘locked-out lover’) *cui Veneris membris vis omnibus exoriatur*, ‘the power of Venus emanates from her whole body’ (4.1172).⁴⁸ Like the (hypothetical) Lucretian lover, too, Catullus immediately demystifies the object of his desires: it is not right to compare humans to gods (141), and she is neither faithful to him nor his legitimate sexual partner—in fact, their affair is adulterous (135–36, 143–46). The poem concludes with sentiments oddly similar to, yet subtly different from, Lucretius’ deromanticized advice on the rational acceptance of the woman’s true character: the speaker resolves to accept that Lesbia will have other lovers, yet persists in the feeling that his life is intertwined with hers. The poem ends *lux mea, qua viva vivere dulce mihi est*, ‘the light of my life, whose existence makes mine sweet’ (68.160)—a

far cry from Lucretius' *nempe aliae quoque sunt; nempe hac sine viximus ante* ('assuredly there are others; assuredly we lived without this one before', 4.1173). Thus, the trajectory of this poem closely parallels that of Lucretius' finale (obsession and idealization give way to disillusion and a more realistic acceptance of the true character of the beloved)—but, once again, disillusion eventuates not in release from the 'toils of Venus' (cf. *Lucr.* 4.1144–48) but in an almost masochistic deepening of the lover's commitment.

In two poems, which may be seen in different ways as the culmination of the Lesbia cycle, the clash between active agency and passive victimhood—put differently, between philosophical action and lyric passion—comes to the fore. The first is perhaps Catullus' most famous poem, *odi et amo* (85):

odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris?

nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

I hate and I love. Why do I do that, perhaps you ask? I don't know, but I feel it happening and I'm in torment.

We almost hear that exasperation of a Lucretius or a Cicero in the voice of this poem's anonymous interlocutor: *why* feel both love and hate at once?⁴⁹ The spare and stripped-down language of the couplet (a sequence of eight verbs, active and passive, with minimal connecting conjunctions and a single pronoun) focusses sharply on the contrast between affect and cognition, active control and passive feeling: *nescio*, 'I don't know' clashes starkly with *sentio*, 'I feel', at the midpoint of the same line; *facio*, 'I do' with *fieri* 'it happens [to me]'; and the two lines are framed by what feels like an inexorable sequence of cause and effect: *odi et amo*, 'I hate and I love', *excrucior*, 'I'm in torment', or more literally, 'I'm crucified'—a punishment traditionally reserved for the enslaved, the group within Roman society most starkly deprived of agency. Catullus' evocation of conflicting emotions is at the furthest possible remove from Cicero's assertion that love, like all our feelings, 'is experienced only through one's own opinions and judgement, and is voluntary' (*nullam* [sc. *perturbationem*] *esse nisi opinabilem, nisi iudicio susceptam, nisi voluntariam*, *Tusc.* 4.76).

Catullus' dilemma is elaborated at greater length in poem 76, with which I conclude. The poem begins with a sardonic allusion to the philosophical commonplace that virtuous action brings its own reward in the form of pleasant memories.⁵⁰ The generalization, however, soon resolves into awareness of a good conscience specifically in the erotic sphere:

Siqua recordanti benefacta priora voluptas

est homini, cum se cogitat esse pium,

nec sanctam violasse fidem, nec foedere in ullo

divum ad fallendos numine abusum homines,

multa parata manent in longa aetate, Catulle, 5

ex hoc ingrato gaudia amore tibi.

nam quaecumque homines bene cuiquam aut dicere possunt

aut facere, haec a te dictaque factaque sunt.

omnia quae ingratae perierunt credita menti.

quare cur tete iam amplius excrucies? (Cat. 76.1–10)

If there is any pleasure for a man in recalling past good deeds, when he believes that he has acted dutifully, and not broken a sacred trust or abused the divine power of the gods to deceive people in any pact, many joys await you, Catullus, in the long years to come, from this unrequited love. For whatever good anyone can do for another, in word or deed, this you have said and done. All of which

is lost, entrusted as it was to an ungrateful mind. So why do you keep on torturing yourself?

These lines can productively be read against both the Catullan ideal of the *foedus amicitiae* and the Ciceronian/Lucretian injunction to take control of one's own emotions. Catullus describes his love as *ingratus*, 'unrequited' or—more literally—'thankless', not productive of the *gratia* or debt of goodwill that arises, or should ideally arise, within Roman friendship, as a result of the performance of *benefacta*, 'good deeds', 'services'. The next two couplets elaborate: the speaker, for his part, has fulfilled the obligations incurred by the bond of *amicitia*, but the beloved has failed to reciprocate. The logical conclusion—and here Cicero or Lucretius would concur—is simply to drop the relationship, to 'cease torturing [him]self' (10). But, Catullus continues, it is not that simple:

quin tu animo offirmas teque istinc ipse reducis,
et dis invitis desinis esse miser?
difficile est longum subito deponere amorem?
difficile est, verum hoc qua libet efficias:
una salus haec est, hoc est tibi pervincendum, 15
hoc facias, sive id non pote sive pote.

Why not be strong, pull back from the brink and stop being wretched, since the gods are opposed? Is it hard to lay aside a long-held love all at once? It is hard, but you must do it somehow: this is your one chance of health, this you must overcome. Do it—whether it's possible, or not.

Here, Catullus seems to be more closely in dialogue with Lucretius: the notably prosaic phrase *difficile est* occurs in a very similar context in the finale to Book 4, where Lucretius assures the reader that it *is* possible, however difficult, to free oneself from the pain of love, provided that one is prepared to be realistic:⁵¹

nam vitare, plagas in amoris ne iaciamur,
non ita difficile est quam captum retibus ipsis
exire et validos Veneris perrumpere nodos.
et tamen implicitus quoque possis inque peditus
effugere infestum, nisi tute tibi obviis obstes
et praetermittas animi vitia omnia primum
aut quae corpori sunt eius, quae praepetis ac vis. (Lucr. 4.1146–52)

To avoid becoming entangled in the snares of love **is not so difficult** as to escape those very nets, once trapped, and to break the strong knots of Venus. And yet, even after you have become ensnared and entangled you could still escape the danger, if you do not stand in your own way and overlook at the outset all the psychological and physical faults of the woman you wish for and desire above all others.

Catullus is not persuaded, it seems: while this is the one route to sanity (15), it may ultimately prove impossible to take. Just at this point, the poet turns away from philosophical prescriptions for self-healing to plead with the gods for help: *o di . . . | me miserum aspiciate et, si vitam puriter egi, | eripite hanc pestem perniciemque mihi* ('o gods, look on me in my misery and, if I have lived a virtuous life, eradicate this deadly plague from me', 76.17–20). The idea that love is a kind of disease or mental derangement is common in Greek and Latin literature, and is shared by philosophers and poets alike; nevertheless, it is clear that we

are back here in the world of archaic lyric, where desire is a plague inflicted by the gods, and only the gods have the power to cure it.⁵²

4. Catullus vs. Philosophical Therapy

My study of Catullus' interaction with the vocabulary and ideas of contemporary thinkers on the theme of erotic entanglement and erotic obsession tends to confirm a point made earlier, that the emphatic rejection by both Cicero and Lucretius of a supernatural aetiology for love (and the emotions in general) tends *ipso facto* to imply that this was a belief still widespread amongst contemporary readers. Two models of love coexist in Catullus, and at times come into conflict: it is represented both as an external force wielded by Venus and Cupid that grips the lover with a violence beyond his (or her) power to control, and as a pact of reciprocal obligation, closely analogous to Roman male friendship, freely entered into—and maintained or betrayed—by the lover's choosing. In the epigrams in particular Catullus seems to incline towards the latter, as an ideal which however is developed only in the context of its failure; ultimately, the poet reverts to the more traditional model, turning to the gods as the only means of relief from his emotional anguish.

Both Lucretius and Cicero, as we have seen, are insistent that love and sexual desire, like other emotions, are within our power to regulate, if not entirely exclude, on the basis of rational judgement and calculation. Catullus, it seems, is prepared to go with the philosophers only so far, finally rejecting the psychological therapy that they offer. Realistic assessment of the qualities of the beloved does no good, he implies, and serves only to inflame his desire. The Lucretian and Ciceronian construction of the individual as an active agent, ideally in full control of his or her impulses, is in effect rejected by the poet for an alternative model of emotion as something that *happens to us*, and is not subject to the power of reason: *quare id faciam, fortasse requires? nescio, sed fieri sentio* ('why do I do that, perhaps you ask? I don't know, but I feel it happen'). Catullus flirts with the language of the philosophers, only to turn it back, in the last analysis, on its proponents: far from being 'voluntary' or 'within our power', love is ultimately (as we might say) in the lap of the gods.

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Notes

- ¹ Sappho frs. 130 and 31 Voigt. For faintness or death as a 'loosening of the limbs', see, e.g., Homer, *Iliad* 4.469, 11.240, *Odyssey* 24.345.
- ² Anacreon fr. 413 Page; Ibycus fr. 286 Page. For desire as a violent, elemental force, cf. also Sappho fr. 47 Voigt, Anacreon fr. 396 Page. On *erōs* in archaic poetry, see Carson (1986, pp. 3–52), Cyrino (1995, esp. pp. 71–164) and Calame (1999, esp. pp. 13–38).
- ³ For intertextual connections between Sappho and Catullus, and their broader implications, see esp. Greene (2007), Thévenaz (2019) and Thorsen (2019). On Catullus 51 as a translation of Sappho, see most recently Young (2015, pp. 166–81), with further bibliography.
- ⁴ The classic instance is Apollonius' account of Medea's first encounter with Jason in *Argonautica* 3 (where her burning passion for the hero originates, notably, in the intervention of Aphrodite and Eros at the behest of Hera and Athene); cf. also Theocritus, *Idyll* 2.82–90 for the depiction of love as a wasting disease. For developments between the archaic and the Hellenistic period, see Calame (1999, pp. 56–64) and Bellandi (2012, pp. 19–22); for love in Hellenistic epigram, see also Gutzwiller (2015). For different perspectives on (anti-)philosophical strands in Catullus' poetry, cf. Godwin (2018), O'Hearn (2020), Uden (2021) and Gale (2022).

- 5 On this poem, see Gutzwiller (1998, pp. 157–60), who compares Asclepiades, *Anth. Pal.* 5.169 = *Epigram* 1 Gow-Page, a priamel proclaiming the experience of mutual erotic fulfilment to be ‘sweeter’ (*hēdion*) than a draft of cool water to a thirsty man in summer, or the sight of the spring constellation Corona Borealis to sailors after winter’s storms. Gutzwiller suggests (pp. 128–30) that the emphatic polyptoton *hēdu . . . hēdu . . . hēdion* is evocative of Epicurean *hēdonē*, or pleasure, as the ultimate goal of life: compare Lucretius 2.1–13 (*suave . . . suave . . . sed nil dulcius est*, ‘sweet [to the observer from a safe distance are the struggles of sailors at sea or soldiers clashing in battle] . . . but nothing is sweeter [than philosophical detachment and tranquillity]’). Gutzwiller argues persuasively that Asclepiades’ implicit substitution of erotic fulfilment for Epicurean serenity is pointed.
- 6 All translations are my own, except where otherwise indicated.
- 7 Contrast 1.10–11, where Cicero declines to combat fear of the mythical terrors of underworld, since no one believes in them in any case.
- 8 Pace Whitmarsh (2016, esp. pp. 173–85 on Epicurus and Lucretius), whose arguments cannot be addressed in detail here; as Whitmarsh admits, however, both Epicurus and Lucretius make it clear that the gods *do* exist (p. 184), and it is in my view special pleading to suggest that ‘atheism was the logical extension of their worldview’ (p. 185). On Epicurean theology, see also Spinelli and Verde (2020), with further bibliography.
- 9 *Tusc.* 3.22, 4.11. Cicero’s own affiliation to the sceptical (non-dogmatic) New Academy (see, e.g., *Tusc.* 3.12) allowed him to adopt on a provisional basis whatever philosophical position appeared most plausible.
- 10 Which is not to say, as is sometimes suggested, that the Stoic wise person will feel *no* emotion: rather, he or she will experience only the reasoned versions of the emotions which Cicero calls ‘consistencies’ (*constantiae*; the Greek term is *eupatheiai*): see *Tusc.* 4.13–14. On Stoic theory of the emotions, see esp. Graver (2007).
- 11 Cicero makes the case for Stoic theology in Book 2 of the *De Natura Deorum*; while—in accordance with his sceptical principles—he has the Academic speaker, Cotta, critique the arguments of the Stoic Balbus in Book 3, it is notable that at the conclusion of the dialogue he remarks that he found Balbus’ views the most persuasive (*ND* 3.95).
- 12 Lucretius is arguably doubtful about the value of, or even hostile towards, animals sacrifice (see esp. Summers (1995); Rider (2019)), but nevertheless writes of ‘approaching the shrines of the gods’ as a matter of course at 6.75.
- 13 The role of belief, as opposed to ritual practice, in Roman religion has been the subject of some debate; but it seems fair to say that the older view, exemplified for example in Taylor (1949, pp. 76–97 (esp. pp. 77–78)), that by the late Republic Roman religion was essentially a tool manipulated by a sceptical elite for their own political ends, has largely given way to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between cult practice and personal belief(s): see, most recently, Mackey (2022), with a helpful sketch of the terrain at pp. 27–58; on individual intellectual choices and the state religion, see also Mastrocinque (2007).
- 14 Maltby and Slater prefer to retain the MS reading *insanire*, where Ribbeck prints Manutius’ *sanari*; the textual point does not have a significant bearing on my argument.
- 15 Epicurus’ surviving pronouncements on sexual desire and erotic love appear somewhat contradictory, or at least ambivalent (*Letter to Menoeceus* 131–32, *Vatican Sayings* 18, 51, fr. 67 Usener; Diogenes Laertius 10.118–19); unsurprisingly, however, he—like Lucretius—was apparently adamant in denying the involvement of the gods, here as in other aspects of human life (see Diogenes Laertius 10.118, and, for further discussion of Epicurus’ views, Brown (1987, pp. 101–22), Nussbaum (1994, pp. 149–54), Brennan (1996), Landolfi (2013, pp. 11–21)).
- 16 On the ‘eclipse’ or redefinition of Venus after the proem to Book 1, see Clay (1983, pp. 226–34), Gale (1994, pp. 211–14).
- 17 On the interpretation of these lines, and the wordplay on *Venus/voluptas*, *cupido/Cupido* and *amor/umor* (‘love’/‘desire’ and ‘liquid’, i.e., the seminal fluid which is the actual cause of desire, on Lucretius’ mechanical model), see Brown (1987, pp. 200–2). The etymological play on *amor* and *umor* was first recognized by Friedländer (1941, p. 18) = (2007, pp. 353–54).
- 18 Venus = sex/sexual pleasure: 1073, 1084, 1101, 1128, 1215, 1223, 1235, 1248, 1276; Venus = the beloved/sex-object: 1071, 1185; Venus = the penis: 1200, 1270; the ‘knots’ or ‘snares’ of Venus: 1113, 1148, 1205. Cf. also 1278 (a plain woman’s ability to attract a lover should be attributed to her careful cultivation of her appearance and her adoption of accommodating behaviour—not to ‘the arrows of Venus’); 1090 *cuppedo/Cupido* = sexual desire; 1115 *cupido* = semen. Outside the proem to Book 1 and the finale to Book 4, the name Venus is found only at 1.228, 2.173, 2.437, 3.776, 5.737, 5.848, 5.897, 5.962, 5.1017, in all cases as a more-or-less straightforward metonym (or euphemism) for sex or sexual pleasure, or—in one instance (5.737)—a kind of personification of the coming of spring.
- 19 For Epicurus’ classification of desires, see *Letter to Menoeceus* 127 and *Principal Doctrines* 29; on ‘natural’ and ‘empty’ anger, see Philodemus, *On Anger* 37.32–38.34 Armstrong and McOskey, with Annas (1989, esp. pp. 156–58), and Armstrong and McOskey (2020, pp. 40–45). See also Cic. *Tusc.* 3.28–35 for a (distinctly hostile) account of Epicurus’ theory of distress as a response to *opinio mali* (‘the belief that an evil [is present]’) and its therapy. See further, on Epicurus’ analysis of emotion in general, Annas (1989) and Asmis (2020, pp. 204–13).
- 20 Lucretius touches briefly on homoerotic relationships at 1053, but the bulk of the diatribe is focused on male/female relationships, and clearly targets an implied male reader.

- 21 For a range of views on these lines, and on the corresponding passage at the end of the book (4.1278–87), in which Lucretius explains that love can develop on the basis of familiarity, and of the woman's accommodating ways and careful self-presentation, see Betensky (1980), Brown (1987, pp. 87–91 and 371–72), Nussbaum (1994, pp. 181–87), Gordon (2002), Pope (2023, pp. 176–78) and Zinn (2025).
- 22 All translations from the *Tusculans* are taken from Graver (2002).
- 23 Cicero's views on *amor*, it should be noted, are not perfectly in line with those of the early Stoics (the 'philosophers' about whose theories of 'love whose object is friendship' he expresses scepticism at 4.70). Zeno and Chrysippus, in particular, follow Plato in advocating an idealized form of pederasty: see Price (2002), Graver (2007, pp. 185–89), Gill (2013).
- 24 See esp. 1.146–48 = 2.59–61 = 3.91–93 = 6.39–41; 3.1–2; 5.43–54; 6.24–34. For the medical metaphor specifically in the context of love/sexual desire, see 4.1068–72 (sexual desire as a wound requiring treatment), and see further Caston (2006).
- 25 Cf. 3.23, 3.82, 4.58–62. See further Weisser (2025) and Barney (2025, pp. 17–25), and, for the therapeutic analogy in Hellenistic philosophy more generally, Nussbaum (1994, esp. pp. 13–47). See also Paulson (2023, pp. 157–63) for an examination of the relationship between *voluntas* and philosophical therapy.
- 26 Some scholars believe that the final stanza is in fact a fragment of a separate poem altogether, though recent criticism has tended to come down in favour of unity: see, e.g., Fordyce (1961, p. 219), Trappes-Lomax (2007, p. 127) versus Itzkowitz (1983), Greene (1999) and Young (2015, pp. 166–81).
- 27 Sharrock (2009, pp. 229–32) suggests that Catullus' poem looks back to Sappho through Terence's *Eunuchus*, where the hero, Phaedria, similarly reprimands himself for indulging his passions and exhorts himself to be firm (see esp. 222 *nimis me indulgeo*, 'I'm being too soft on myself'); cf. Polt (2021, pp. 118–20). The presence of comic stereotypes in both Catullus and the philosophical texts is discussed further below: in the case of poem 51, I suggest, the intertextual framework is particularly complex, Catullus' reception of Sappho being mediated by both the philosophical and the comic tradition, as well as the philosophers' employment of comic stereotypes (see further n. 30 below).
- 28 Bellandi (2012, p. 38, n. 69) notes in this connection that Cicero equates *laetitia gestiens* with [*laetitia*] *nimia* ('excessive gladness') at *Tusc.* 4.13; cf. 3.24 *voluptas gestiens, id est, praeter modum elata laetitia* ('wild delight, that is, gladness carried away to excess').
- 29 Both verbs are also used by Lucretius in the context of physical phenomena, of blood spurting from a wound (2.195), buildings shaken by an earthquake (6.550) and iron filings 'leaping' under the influence of the magnet (6.1044–47).
- 30 Fowler (2000) and Bellandi (2012) explore the impact of Classical and Hellenistic literary receptions of Sappho, through which Lucretius' and Catullus' quotations of the Greek poem are filtered: Fowler notes in particular that Sappho's poem had probably already been exploited by previous philosophers in discussion of the symptoms of love-sickness and other passions. It is also important to note that Sappho is herself drawing on the Homeric lexicon of fear (see Rissman (1983, pp. 72–90)), so that Lucretius in effect restores the imagery to its original context, whereas Catullus maintains Sappho's redeployment from the battlefield to the erotic sphere.
- 31 For similar readings of the *otium*-stanza, cf. Tietze (1939) and Bellandi (2012, esp. pp. 37–39). As will become clear, however, I cannot agree with Bellandi's conclusion that Catullus ultimately accepts responsibility for his own emotional weakness, and rejects 'amour-passion' if not tempered by the 'milder' form of *amor* that—in Bellandi's view—he associates with marriage.
- 32 It is notoriously difficult to establish the directionality of intertextual echoes between Catullus and Lucretius, who were more or less exact contemporaries (though precise dates are uncertain in both cases). Cicero's *Tusculans* was not completed until 45 BC, almost certainly after Catullus' death.
- 33 On Sappho's phrase, see esp. Furley (2000), with further bibliography. On *homoiōsis theōi* in Platonism and Hellenistic philosophy, see Roloff (1970, pp. 177–206), Erler (2002), Jedan (2013), Reydam-Schils (2017) and Sedley (2017).
- 34 See, e.g., Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 135, *Vatican Sayings* 33, Cicero, *De Finibus* 2.88; Chrysippus, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 3.54, Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 2.153.
- 35 The idea becomes still more prominent in Seneca: see, e.g., *Epistulae Morales* 53.11, 73.12–13; *De Constantia Sapientis* 6.8, 8.2; *De Tranquillitate Animi* 2.3. As far as I have been able to discover, Seneca is the only philosophical writer to suggest that the sage might actually surpass the gods, in the sense that, where the gods are simply beyond the reach of evils, the wise man actively surmounts them (*De Providentia* 6.6: I am most grateful for Ludovico Pontiggia for drawing my attention to this passage). The hyperbole of Catullus' expression seems closer to the spirit of comedy, as I argue below.
- 36 Cf. also Plautus, *Mercator* 603, *Poenulus* 276–77. In the next generation, the love-poet Propertius similarly borrows from the comic repertoire, declaring that 'anyone can become a god in a single night' if blessed with his girlfriend's favour (2.15.39–40; cf. 2.14.10).
- 37 See esp. *Tusc.* 4.68, 72–73 and 76, where Cicero quotes from the comic poets Caecilius, Sextus Turpilius and Terence, as illustrations of the irrationality, inconsistency and immoderation of lovers. On comic echoes in Cicero and Lucretius, see further Rosivach (1980), Goldberg (2005, pp. 97–100), Hanses (2020, pp. 343–47), Polt (2021, pp. 79–107).
- 38 The classic instance in comedy is Plautus, *Curculio* 1–157: for further examples, see Copley (1956, pp. 1–42). Hanses (2020, pp. 347–48) argues persuasively for a more direct echo of Terence, *Eunuchus* 930–40, where the slave Parmeno dilates on the

- contrast between the elegant appearance that courtesans present in public and their disgusting behaviour behind closed doors: cf. Brown (1987, p. 298).
- ³⁹ Caston (2006) argues that the love-elegists of the next generation similarly reject philosophical ideas about love and embrace their passion; on my analysis, however, the relation between Catullus' poetry and philosophical treatments of *amor* is somewhat more complex. In common with other scholars, Caston assumes without argument (Caston 2006, p. 276) that Lucretius is 'influenced' by Catullus, rather than vice versa.
- ⁴⁰ Particularly Apollonius' depiction of Medea's incipient love for Jason at *Argonautica* 3.275–98, 616–824. The apostrophe of Venus and Cupid at 64.94–98 is closely based on *Argon.* 4.445–49.
- ⁴¹ Fire: 92–93, 124, 197; waves: 62, 97–98.
- ⁴² Ross (1969, pp. 80–95), with important qualifications in Lyne (1980, pp. 24–34) (whence the phrase 'aristocratic obligation' quoted in the main text above). On friendship in Roman literature and culture, see Williams (2012).
- ⁴³ Examples are conveniently assembled by Lyne (1980, p. 291, n. 4). *benevolentia* in particular is a recurrent term in Cicero's *De Amicitia* (19, 20, 23, 26, 29, 30, etc.).
- ⁴⁴ See *Amic.* 18–21, 27–29, 65. For the Stoic ideal of friendship, see, e.g., Graver (2007, pp. 173–85).
- ⁴⁵ An overlapping of philosophical and comic intertexts is again perceptible here: see Konstan (1986, p. 391), Barsby (1999, pp. 7–10) and Polt (2021, pp. 123–24) for echoes in this poem of Terence, *Eunuchus* 175–77 (*utinam istuc verbum ex animo ac vere diceret | ... si istuc crederem | sincere dici, quidvis possem perpeti*, 'If only you spoke those words from the heart and truthfully ... if I believed that that was said sincerely, I could put up with anything').
- ⁴⁶ In addition to poems 70 and 72, see 75, 76 and 87.
- ⁴⁷ With *mulier cupido quod dicit amanti*, 'what a woman says to her eager lover', 70.3, cf. Lucretius 4.1138 *cupido adfixum cordi viviscit ut ignis*, 'which is implanted in his eager heart and takes hold like fire', similarly of the jealous lover whose suspicions are fed by an ambiguous phrase used by his beloved.
- ⁴⁸ Cf. also Cat. 86.5–6 *Lesbia formosa est, quae cum pulcherrima tota est, | tum omnibus una omnis surripuit Veneres* ('Lesbia is [truly] beautiful: not only is she altogether lovely, but she has stolen all the desirability [lit. 'Venuses'] from all other women'. In line 4 of the same poem, Catullus denies that the rival beauty Quintia possesses a *mica salis*, literally 'a grain of salt', connoting wit or 'sparkle': the phrase resonates with Lucr. 4.1162, where *tota merum sal*, 'pure salt through and through', is one of the ridiculous pet-names that deluded lovers confer on their girlfriends (in this case, a woman of short stature—Quintia, conversely, is tall: *longa*, 86.1, *tam magno ... corpore*, 4).
- ⁴⁹ As Hanses observes, there is a general similarity between Catullus' contradictory feelings and those of the Lucretian lover, who experiences an unconscious urge to hurt the object of his desire, as the source of the pain of lack (Lucr. 4.1081–83; Hanses (2020, p. 344)).
- ⁵⁰ Cf. esp. Cicero, *On Old Age* 9 *conscientia bene actae vitae multorumque bene factorum recordatio iucundissima est* ('consciousness of a life well-lived and the memory of many good deeds is very pleasant'); also (e.g.) *Republic* 6.8, *Tusculans* 1.109; Seneca, *On Benefits* 4.12.4, *Letters* 81.23–24.
- ⁵¹ The echo is noted by Kenney (1970, pp. 389–90) = (2007, pp. 325–26), who, however, takes it as read that Catullus' is the earlier of the two texts. Kenney also draw attention to the parallel between Catullus 86 and Lucretius 4.1172 discussed above (n. 48).
- ⁵² Love as a disease in Cicero and Lucretius: see esp. Lucr. 4.1069 *inque dies gliscit furor atque aerumna gravescit* ('from day to day the madness grows and the suffering increases'), Cic. *Tusc.* 4.74–75 *tamquam aegroti non convallescentes saepe curandus est* (sc. the lover) ... *maxume autem admonendus <est>, quantus sit furor amoris* ('he should also be distracted at times ... like invalids who are not getting well ... but the most important thing is to warn him what frenzy there is in love'), with Booth (1997). For the imagery of disease in archaic lyric, see Cyrino (1995, esp. pp. 91–120 and pp. 143–54).

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