

# Translation of Catullus 51 and Sappho 31

Lauren Hunter

UC Berkeley

Classical Languages, Molecular and Cell Biology

Class of 2014

**Abstract:** *Catullus 51, “Ille mi par,” is Catullus’ translation and adaptation of Sappho’s poem “φαίνεται μοι” (Sappho 31 by the Lobel and Voigt numbering). After translating Catullus 51 in a Latin Lyric class, I became very interested in comparing the two poems and investigating how Catullus used Sappho’s framework to express his own desire and longing for Lesbia. Here I submit a translation of Catullus 51 and one of Sappho 31, specifically intended to be read side by side. I have attempted to render a translation of each poem that will demonstrate both the areas in which Catullus nearly literally translates the Sappho, and the lines which are Catullus’ own invention. Of particular interest are the last four lines of Catullus’ poem, which end the poem on a restrained, dispassionate note that contrasts sharply with the strong emotion of the first three stanzas. The Sappho poem, by contrast, ends with a culmination of Sappho’s passion and a resolve for action. I present both poems for comparison, so that a reader may appreciate the depth of emotion in both poems, and the differing conclusion of each poem. I was particularly inspired and influenced by Anne Carson’s dynamic translation of Sappho 31, although mine differs significantly from hers. My translation of Catullus 51 diverges from most other translations I have read in that I have attempted a translation that is fairly poetically emotional.*

## References and Lexical Acknowledgments:

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**Catullus**

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

dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis  
 eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,  
 Lesbia, adspexi, nihil est super mi  
 vocis in ore

lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus  
 flamma demanat, sonitu suo  
 tintinant aures, gemina teguntur  
 lumina nocte.

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

**Sappho**

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν  
 ἔμμεν' ὄνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι  
 ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδου φωνεί-  
 σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἡμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν  
 καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·  
 ὡς γὰρ <ἔς> σ' ἴδω βρόχε' ὡς με φώνη-  
 σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἴκει,

ἀλλὰ καμ μὲν γλῶσσα ἔαγε, λέπτον  
 δ' αὐτίκα χρῶι πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν,  
 ὀπάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-  
 μεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

ἑκαδέ μ' ἴδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ  
 παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας  
 ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης  
 φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐται.

ἀλλὰ τὰν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ καὶ πένητα

### Catullus

he seems to me to be equal to the gods  
he – if I may utter it – surpasses the gods,  
he who sits facing you always  
and sees and hears you

sweetly laughing, and this steals  
all my senses from me and I am lost:  
for as soon as I see you  
Lesbia  
no words remain in my mouth for me

but my tongue is paralyzed  
and fine flames run through my body  
and my ears ring with their own sound  
and my eyes are doubly covered with shadows.

Leisure, Catullus, is not good for you:  
Leisure you relish, and you act too  
unrestrainedly:  
leisure has destroyed past kings and happy  
cities.

### Sappho

to me he seems to be equal to the gods,  
that man who sits near you, facing you  
and hears you  
speaking sweetly

laughing delightfully, and this actually  
makes my heart tremble within my breast;  
for whenever I look at you – even a glance! –  
no words come to me,

but my tongue is snapped  
and fine flames run through my body instantly  
and I see nothing with my eyes  
and my ears ring

and sweat pours down me,  
and all of me is trembling,  
and I am paler green than grass  
and I seem to lack but little of dying.

but all should be risked! since even a poor  
person –