



CATULLUS' *PASSER* AND OVID'S *PSITTACUS*: THE DIRTY AND THE DEAD*

This article brings together two well known literary readings: the obscene interpretation of Catullus' *passer*, and the interpretation of Ovid, *Amores* 2.6 as a self-conscious, creative imitation of Catullus 3. It will first offer a further reason to think that Catullus' contemporary readers understood c.3 as a poem about impotence, and then go on to suggest that Ovid had some fun with this interpretation in his *psittacus*-poem.

Keywords: Catullus, *passer*, Poliziano, Martial, Ovid, *psittacus*

The obscene interpretation of Catullus' *passer* (c.2 and 3) is well known. It goes back in the modern era to Poliziano, who understood Lesbia's pet sparrow as an allegory for the poet's male member.¹ His modesty kept him from saying so outright, but he cited the following lines of Martial that left no doubt as to what he meant:

* I would like first and foremost to thank a student of mine, Chase Cartwright. We were reading Ovid, *Amores* 2.6 in my intermediate Latin poetry course, and, after a few lines, I asked the class whether the poem reminded them of anything. Being an astute class, they immediately mentioned Catullus 3, the obscene interpretation of which I had shared with them. Chase added that he would be surprised if Ovid did not in some way allude to that interpretation of Catullus 3 – and the very next lines that came up were 19–20, which are at the heart of this article. I would also like to thank Scott McGill and Richard F. Thomas for reading various drafts of this article, and the anonymous referee for many helpful corrections and comments – including one spot-on suggestion (n. 25). In citing ancient authors, I use the OCT editions: the second edition of Lindsay's *Martial* (1929), Mynors' *Catullus* (1958), and Kenney's edition of Ovid's erotic works (1961) – though I always write *v* in place of consonantal *u*. All translations are my own.

¹ Poliziano, *Misc.* 6. Giovanni Pontano had previously alluded to the obscene sense of Catullus' *passer* (*Parth.* 1.5, esp. lines 17–29), and perhaps Panormita had as well (*Herm.* 1.9.25), but that is not the same thing as an actual argument with supporting evidence. For the opposing view, that the obscene sense of *passer* is unhelpful to our understanding of c.2 and 3, see H. D. Jocelyn, 'On Some Unnecessarily Indecent Interpretations of Catullus 2 and 3', *AJP* 101 (1980), 421–41; and for the view that it hurts our appreciation of the relevant epigrams of Martial, see R. A. Pitcher, 'Passer Catulli: The Evidence of Martial', *Antichthon* 16 (1982), 97–103.

*Da nunc² basia, sed Catulliana:
quae si tot fuerint quot ille dixit,
donabo tibi Passerem Catulli.*

(Mart. 11.6.14–17)

Now give me kisses, but the Catullan kind: and if they are as many as he spoke of, I'll give you the *Sparrow* of Catullus.

These words are addressed to one Dindymus at a party on the Saturnalia, whom Martial compared a little earlier to Nero's notorious male lover Pythagoras (line 10). Poliziano is therefore justified in his suspicion:

Nimis enim foret insubidus poeta (quod nefas credere), si Catulli passerem denique ac non aliud quidpiam, quod suspicor, magis donaturum se puero post oscula diceret. (Poliziano, *Misc.* 6)

For the poet would be quite naïve (which is impossible to believe), if he were saying that after the kisses he would give the boy the sparrow of Catullus, and not – as I suspect – something else.

In other words, Catullus' *passer* was interpreted by Martial as a reference to the poet's penis. The heading of this entry in the *Miscellanea*, moreover, implies that Catullus himself intended this reference: *Quo intellectu Catullianus passer accipiendus, locusque etiam apud Martialem indicatus* ('In what sense the Catullan sparrow is to be understood, and also a passage in Martial cited [sc. in support of this interpretation]'). For Poliziano, then, the obscene sense of Catullus' *passer* is not just Martial's dirty mind at work;³ it is the sense in which Catullus' *passer* is, in fact, to be understood.

Was Poliziano right? I think so. I am convinced partly by Giuseppe Giangrande, who brought this interpretation back to life in contemporary classical scholarship,⁴ but mostly by Richard W. Hooper, who argued

² Poliziano wrote *mihi* instead of *nunc*; cf. Catull. 5.7: *da mi basia mille* ('give me a thousand kisses').

³ It is possible, of course, that Martial created an obscene reference where Catullus intended none; for such an interpretation, see J. Ward Jones Jr., 'Catullus' *Passer* as *Passer*', *G&R* 45 (1998), 191–3.

⁴ G. Giangrande, 'Catullus' Lyrics on the *Passer*', *MPhL* 1 (1975), 137–46. E. N. Genovese, 'Symbolism in the *Passer* Poems', *Maia* 26 (1974), 121–5, has not been received as well, in part because he imagines that Lesbia's *passer* is all at once a real pet, a symbol for the poet's penis, a magic charm, and a rival lover. For a more recent attempt to blend the obscene reading of the *passer* with a real pet bird, a brave reader might consult A. Vergados and S. O'Bryhim, 'Reconsidering Catullus' *Passer*', *Latomus* 16 (2012), 101–13.

forcefully for it,⁵ and by Richard F. Thomas, who brought in supporting details from Hellenistic epigram and Roman comedy.⁶ I will not review all of their arguments here, but I will briefly add an observation of my own, which I have not seen elsewhere.⁷

In another (undoubtedly obscene) poem of Catullus, we are told that the notorious pair, Furius and Aurelius, read his kissing-poem addressed to Lesbia (c.5) and somehow concluded from it that he was *male...marem* ('scarcely a man', c.16.13).⁸ This accusation is consistent with line 4, where we are told of their claim that the poet is *parum pudicum* ('not pure enough'). Furius and Aurelius, then, have obviously interpreted something in Catullus' poetry to suggest that he engaged in an unmanly and degrading sexual act. It is telling that Catullus does not even try to refute their interpretation. If he disagreed with it, he could have just said that his poetry does not mean what they claim it does. Instead, he replies that there is no need for his verses to be chaste (line 6) – thus conceding the point that they are not. Catullus defends himself only by asserting that his poetry is at odds with his true character: he himself is *castum* ('chaste', line 5). This, of course, amounts to an admission that Furius and Aurelius were right to detect in his poetry a reference to his involvement in a disgusting sex act; they were wrong only in assuming that Catullus was serious.

⁵ R. W. Hooper, 'In Defence of Catullus' Dirty Sparrow', *G&R* 32 (1985), 162–78.

⁶ R. F. Thomas, 'Sparrows, Hares, and Doves: a Catullan Metaphor and its Tradition', *Helios* 20 (1993), 131–42.

⁷ In what follows, I will focus on the obscene interpretation of c.3, which involves impotence, but I should at least acknowledge that this poem is the second part of a diptych with c.2, where the obscene interpretation leads in another direction: Catullus wishes that he could play with the 'sparrow' just like Lesbia does (line 9); it appears that our poet has not quite his girlfriend's skill in handling the male member.

⁸ I assume that the collection called the *Passer*, arranged by Catullus himself, dedicated to Cornelius Nepos, and beginning really with c.2, included many of the poems at the beginning of the *Liber Catullianus* as we now have it, at least up to c.26 and perhaps further. For a convenient overview of the topic of Catullus' editorship, see M. B. Skinner, 'Authorial Arrangement of the Collection: Debate Past and Present', in M. B. Skinner (ed.), *A Companion to Catullus* (Malden and Oxford, 2007), 35–54. But although I will argue here that Furius and Aurelius read c.3 as well as c.5, I do not assume that they read them for the first time in the *Passer*. Such a scenario would leave no time for them to read Catullus' love poems, level their accusation against him, and provoke his response in c.16, which appeared in the same collection. Instead, I assume that this scandal occurred during a period when the *passer*-poems (c.2 and 3) and the kissing-poems (c.5 and 7) were circulating independently of any collection. Furius and Aurelius read them and accused Catullus of engaging in an unmanly sex act (perhaps in scurrilous verses of their own, if the former was indeed Furius Bibaculus), and that Catullus responded to this accusation swiftly in c.16. Then all of these poems came together in the *Passer*, so that Catullus' contemporary readers could relive the drama that they had witnessed in real time.

The claim of Furius and Aurelius cannot have been based solely on the poems to Juventius (esp. c.48). The words *milia multa basiorum* ('many thousand kisses', c.16.12) specifically point back to *milia multa* (sc. *basiorum*) in Catullus 5.10. Moreover, I know of no evidence that homosexual relations were regarded as unmanly or degrading, as long as one took the active role. It was *cinaedi* and *pathici* (both words refer to men who take the passive role in anal intercourse) who came in for all the abuse. So much is clear from c.16 itself: Catullus asserts that he is a real man and pure and chaste – in a poem where he threatens to violate two men in every imaginable orifice, treating them like the *cinaedi* and *pathici* that they are (the threat is in lines 1 and 14; the terms of abuse appear in line 2).

This means that their interpretation was based on Catullus' famous kissing-poem, c.5. Furius and Aurelius apparently inferred that, as Thomas N. Winter puts it: 'Anyone kissing a girl 3,300 times... must be incapable of anything else.'⁹ In other words, they claimed that Catullus was impotent, and therefore unable to take the active role in sexual intercourse. Impotent men were commonly assumed to engage in shameful sexual acts.¹⁰ Once Furius and Aurelius concluded that Catullus was impotent, their further conclusion would follow, like night after day, that he was 'scarcely a man', 'not pure enough', and not the 'chaste' man that he now claims to be.

But how could Furius and Aurelius make this argument stick? No normal person would read c.5 and take it as an admission of impotence rather than what it appears to be: a poem on the importance of living for right now, which for Catullus means that he and Lesbia should throw themselves into love with total abandon. That is what all the kissing is about. Not that Furius and Aurelius were necessarily normal. But still, why put forth an argument that was unlikely to convince anyone else? Yet Catullus found their reading of his poetry so plausible that he was forced to concede the point. Why would he have done so if their evidence was so flimsy?

⁹ T. N. Winter, 'Catullus Purified: A Brief History of Carmen 16', *Arethusa* 6 (1973), 262–3. In this sense, we can accept the interpretation of W. Kroll, *Kommentar zu Catull* (Leipzig, 1923), ad c.16.12–13: 'ein echter Mann begnügt sich nach dieser Anschauung nicht mit *basia*'. See also T. P. Wiseman, 'Catullus 16', *LCM* 1 (1976), 16–17.

¹⁰ Catullus himself acknowledges that impotence can lead to sexual deviance (c.67.20–8); in this case, a young bride's father-in-law must pick up the slack for his impotent son. For a clear example of impotence leading to cunnilingus, see Mart. 11.25, and the detailed discussion of F. M. Sapsford, *The 'Epic' of Martial* (Diss. Birmingham, 2012), 155.

One possibility, I would suggest, is that the evidence was not flimsy, but as firm as it could be: Catullus had announced to the world – with a nod and a wink, under the cover of the dead *passer* in c.3 – that he was impotent. After that, it would be easy for Furius and Aurelius to read impotence into c.5 in a believable way. Catullus could then be accused of engaging in unmanly relations with Lesbia. This presumably involved *os impurum* ('impure mouth' – the condition arising from performing oral sex on someone): Catullus implies in another poem that Lesbia enjoyed being serviced in this way (by her brother, naturally; c.79).¹¹ Catullus' admission of impotence would also, of course, cast his Juventius-poems in a whole new light: it would be hard, I imagine, to take the active role in homosexual intercourse without an erection. Juventius will have had to do all the work. But that is not Furius' and Aurelius' main concern at the moment. When they said that his verses were *molliculi* ('soft little things', c.16.4), they appear to have been thinking about the impotence that Catullus admitted first in c.3 and then confirmed in c.5.

I would therefore paraphrase Catullus 16 this way: 'Furius and Aurelius, you read c.5 and assumed from it that I was impotent, and ended up having to satisfy Lesbia in an unmanly and degrading way; I cannot dispute your interpretation of my poetry (since I all but admitted as much to the world in c.3); but I am here to tell you that it was all a joke; I am far from impotent, and will prove it by violating you orally and anally.'¹² This is only one possible reading, but it adds to the likelihood, established by many other arguments,¹³ that Catullus meant, and his contemporary readers understood, c.3 to be a poem on the 'death' of his *mentula* ('penis'). So much can be said, then, about the obscene interpretation of Catullus 3.

Almost as well known, if not as venerable, is Stephen E. Hinds' interpretation of Ovid's *psittacus*-poem, which begins as follows:

¹¹ The charge of Furius and Aurelius, that Catullus is *parum pudicum*, can certainly imply *os impurum*. In c.21, Catullus threatens Aurelius with *irrumatio* 'oral violation' if he keeps seeing Juventius, and says that stopping is the only way for him to stay 'pure' (*desine, dum licet pudico*, line 12) – that is, to be spared *irrumatio*.

¹² *Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo* ('I will violate you anally and orally', c.16.1 and 14) is my source for the final point. I will add here that I have always assumed the placement of these lines to be iconic. The line at the head of the poem represents oral violation, and the same line repeated at the end of the poem represents anal violation. The reader is invited to picture Catullus moving from the top to the bottom of the two men.

¹³ See the articles cited in n. 4, 5, and 6.

*Psittacus, Eois imitatrix ales ab Indis,
occidit*

(Ov. *Am.* 2.6.1–2)

The parrot, the imitating bird from the Eastern Indians, has died.

It is easy enough to see that *Amores* 2.6 alludes to Catullus 3: in each of them, the poet mourns the death of his mistress' pet bird. But Ovid helps us along with language that self-consciously draws attention to the fact that he is engaging with Catullus. As Hinds puts it: 'Corinna's engaging *psittacus* is modelled on Lesbia's famous *passer*, or "sparrow": and it is called an *imitatrix ales* by Ovid not just because, as a parrot, its role in nature is to mimic; but because its role in the Latin erotic tradition is to "imitate" that particular bird celebrated by Catullus.'¹⁴

The purpose of this article is to ask whether it may be possible to bring these two interpretations together in some way. For if Ovid is consciously alluding to Catullus, and readers as early as the Late Republic read c.3 as a poem about impotence, then we might reasonably expect the *psittacus*-poem to refer at some point the obscene interpretation of the dead *passer*. Hooper tries desperately to find an Ovidian reference along these lines. He suggests that the origin of the *psittacus* 'from the Eastern Indians' (*ab Indis...Eois*) is an allusion to Catullus' farewell poem to Lesbia, in which the poet imagines travelling 'to the *Indians* on the edge of the world' (*ad extremos...Indos*, c.11.2), 'where the shore is beaten by the long resounding *Eastern* wave' (*Eoa | ...unda*, lines 3–4).¹⁵ He also detects an 'exaggerated and humorous contrast in sound between *passer*, *deliciae* and *psittacus imitatrix*'.¹⁶ Then, in the last line of the article, he comes up with this joke:

In the case of Ovid, we...may even suggest that he anticipated the joke of Martial 1.7. Compared with the sparrow the parrot is, after all, a considerably bigger bird.¹⁷

¹⁴ The quote is from S. E. Hinds, 'Generalising about Ovid', *Ramus* 16 (1987), 7. K. S. Myers, 'Psittacus Redux: Imitation and Literary Polemic in Statius, *Silvae* 2.4', in C. Damon, J. F. Miller, K. S. Myers, and E. Courtney (eds.), *Vertis in Usum. Studies in Honor of Edward Courtney* (Leipzig, 2002), 189–99, shows how Statius later picks up on Ovid's imitating parrot. I cite Hinds because earlier scholars tend to treat *Am.* 2.6 as a second-rate imitation of c.3; on which, see B. W. Boyd, 'The Death of Corinna's Parrot Reconsidered: Poetry and Ovid's *Amores*', *CJ* 82 (1987), 201, n. 6. Hinds, at least, seems to appreciate that it is a first-rate imitation, and that this is no defect in the poem – which allows for the kind of creative commentary that I propose here.

¹⁵ Hooper (n. 5), 167–8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 175.

A nice punchline to end the article, I suppose, but I wonder whether Hooper might not have missed a much more obvious joke. A little way into *Amores* 2.6, after Ovid has, like a *praeco* ('herald'), summoned all pious birds to the funeral, he addresses the dead parrot:

*quid iuvat, ut datus es, nostrae placuisse puellae?
infelix avium gloria nempe iaces.* (Ov. *Am.* 2.6.19–20)

What does it avail you to have pleased our girl ever since you were given? You, the unfortunate glory of birds, indeed lie dead.

Most modern readers, even if they understand this poem as an allusion to Catullus 3, will probably not have the obscene interpretation of the *passer* in mind. But if ancient readers took Catullus' *passer* in the obscene sense and understood Ovid's *psittacus* as an imitation of it, then it is easy to see how this couplet may have elicited a chuckle or two. Hopefully it will not ruin the joke to look at some suggestive elements of Ovid's phrasing.

To begin with the hexameter: *passer* in the obscene sense, with a verb of giving, apparently means to have sex with someone. The line of Martial, quoted above, suggests this: he says that he will 'give' Dindymus 'the Sparrow of Catullus' (*donabo tibi Passerem Catulli*, 11.6.14–17). Julian Ward Jones Jr., believes that Martial is leading Dindymus on by suggesting that he will 'give him the *passer*', only to add *Catulli* at the end, so that the gift turns out to be merely a book of poetry: 'Dindymus expects a *mentula*; he is promised *metrical*!'¹⁸ Perhaps. But in order for the joke to work, the phrase *passerem donare* must have meant to penetrate sexually. The synonymous, cognate verb *dare* presumably meant the same thing. If Ovid's *psittacus* stands in for Catullus' *passer*, then it is strange for him to ask the dead bird (if I may paraphrase): 'What good does it do you to have *pleased* Corinna from the first time I *gave* you to her?'

Turning to the pentameter, we find that the phrase *nempe iaces* is also suggestive, as *iaceo* is Ovid's preferred verb when talking or joking about impotence. Two examples from the *Amores* will suffice. First a very clear one. In his well known impotence-poem, Ovid uses the verb no less than four times to describe his problem:

¹⁸ Ward Jones Jr. (n. 3), 193.

sed iacui pigro crimen onusque toro (Ov. *Am.* 3.6.4)

But *I lay limp* – a crime and a burden to the bed that saw no action.

truncus iners iacui, species et inutile pondus (ibid., 15)

I lay limp, an inert trunk, a shell of my former self and a useless weight.

nostra tamen iacuerunt velut praemortua membra (ibid., 65)

Our limbs nevertheless *lay limp*, as if (prematurely?)¹⁹ dead.

quin istic pudibunda iaces, pars pessima nostri? (ibid., 69)

Why do you, the worst part of us, *lie there limp* and ashamed?

Although it is more oblique, I cannot resist adding the example of Ovid's famous *Militat omnis amans*-poem, where he notes (among many others) this parallel between the life of a soldier and the life of a lover:

*Mars dubius, nec certa Venus: victique resurgunt,
quosque neges umquam posse iacere, cadunt.* (Ov. *Am.* 1.9.29–30)

Mars is doubtful, but neither is Venus certain: the vanquished rise again, and those who you would say could never *lie dead* do fall.

I will not try to improve on J. C. McKeown's note on the obscene interpretation of this couplet, with ample parallels for *resurgo* meaning 'to become erect again' (though we might add *consurgere* in Ov. *Am.* 3.6.75), for *iaceo* meaning 'to be impotent', and for *victus* meaning 'sexually exhausted'.²⁰ Ovid's bird may have pleased Corinna from

¹⁹ R. F. Thomas, "Death", Doxography, and the "Termerian Evil" (Philodemus, *Epigr.* 27 Page = A. P. 11.30)', *CQ* 41 (1991), 137, suggests that Ovid in this line has the famous impotence epigram of Philodemus as his ultimate source, with an intermediate source in Catull. 50.14–15, where the poet's limbs lay half-dead (*membra* | *semimortua*. . . *iacebant*) on his bed after a day of improvising poetry with his friend Calvus. Catullus' *semimortua* may be a translation of the controversial reading ἡμιθόνεός in line 4 of Philodemus' poem, with a playful reference 'to post-coital exhaustion, real for Philodemus, figurative for Catullus'. If so, and if Ovid's *praemortua* has the sense of 'prematurely dead', then his substitution of the prefix *prae-* for Catullus' *semi-* and Philodemus' ἡμι- has a point: whereas his predecessors took the normal rest between sex acts (real or figurative), his own game is over before it ever gets started. I would add that it helps my main point in this article if Catullus used the verb *iaceo* in a double sense, referring to both intellectual and sexual exhaustion: this would constitute a nice precedent for Ovid's double entendre with the same verb.

²⁰ J. C. McKeown, *Ovid: Amores. Text, Prolegomena, and Commentary in four volumes. Vol. III: A Commentary on Book Two* (Leeds, 1998), *ad loc.*

the first time he gave it to her, but now it lies limp and dead. Again, it is all innocent enough on the surface. But since Ovid deliberately sends us back to Catullus 3, it is hard not to see in these lines a joking reference to the obscene interpretation of his source.²¹

Just to be clear: I do not mean to suggest that my reading of this couplet is the key to understanding *Amores* 2.6 as a whole, or even that it plays a particularly important role in the poem. For that matter, I do not believe that the obscene interpretation of Catullus' *passer*-poems is absolutely essential to our appreciation of them. I have always thought of them as a kind of Rubin's Vase: different readers, or even the same reader at different times, can look at them and see different things – though I do think that their ambiguity was one of the reasons why Catullus thought highly enough of them to place them at the beginning of the poetic book that bore the name of *Passer* in antiquity.²² As for Ovid, he was engaged with many other aspects of the literary tradition, some of which seem much more vital to the present poem. There was the seemingly omnipresent concern of all the Latin love elegists: how to take a theme from a short-format love poem (in this case, c.3) and expand it into a full-length elegy?²³ Also, how to work in elements

²¹ Maximianus may have seen the joke. In his fifth elegy, he uses the phrase *nempe iaces* twice within a single couplet, at the beginning of line 99 and the end of line 100, in a way that recalls the Ovidian *versus serpentinus*. The context is the lament of a young Greek woman for the death of an erection – that of the impotent poet. If Maximianus is borrowing Ovid's language about the death of Corinna's parrot and transferring it to a context of impotence, then it is reasonable to think that he recognized *Amores* 2.6.19–20 as an allusion to Catullus' dead 'sparrow' already in the sixth century AD.

²² If the obscene interpretation of Catullus' *passer* is right, then this means that the book called *Passer* would have the double sense of 'Sparrow' and 'Penis'. It is worth noting that Ovid's *Amores*, by ancient convention, may have had an alternative title, *Arma*, from the first word of the collection – it was in fact called this in the Middle Ages; see E. H. Alton, 'Ovid in the Medieval Schoolroom', *Hermathena* 95 (1961), 72. But *arma* was likewise a slang word for 'penis'; for an Ovidian example, see *Am.* 1.9.26, and for a discussion of weapon-related terms in this sense, see J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London, 1982), 19–22. If Ovid meant *Arma* as an alternative title for the *Amores*, with an obscene double entendre, then this may also suggest that he understood the title of Catullus' *Passer* in such a way. Ovid was willing to play around with the first words of earlier poems. *Arma* itself is an obvious allusion to the first word of the *Aeneid*; but in *Tr.* 2.534, Ovid accuses Vergil of bringing 'arms and the man into Tyrian couches' – again playing on the obscene sense of *arma*; see J. Ingleheart, *A Commentary on Ovid, Tristia, Book 2* (Oxford, 2010), *ad loc.*

²³ This is the procedure assumed for Gallus by F. Jacoby, 'Zur Entstehung der Römischen Elegie', *RM* 60 (1905), 38–105, described in detail in connection with Catullus by A. L. Wheeler, 'Catullus as an Elegist', *AJPh* 36 (1915), 155–84, and manifestly engaged in by all of the Latin love elegists. For a convenient and fairly recent collection, see the essays in A. Keith (ed.), *Latin Elegy and Hellenistic Epigram. A Tale of Two Genres at Rome* (Newcastle, 2011). To be clear, I do not endorse any theory that Latin love elegy is in some essential way an expansion of epigram. Nonetheless, epigram was obviously one of the major sources of the genre.

of the epicedion and native Roman funeral rites?²⁴ Or, again, how to convert Tibullus' famous Elysium for lovers into an Elysium for lovers' pets?²⁵ Any one of these concerns is closer to the heart of Ovid's program as a Latin love elegist.

What I think happened is this. As Ovid was sorting through these literary issues and trying to have some fun with them along the way, he remembered, as Martial would later do, that Catullus 3 admitted of an obscene interpretation. It was unlike Ovid to let anything like that pass without comment, and so he wrote the couplet in question using similarly ambiguous language – almost a throw-away line, but one that might make any reader who remembered the obscene interpretation of Catullus' *passer* laugh knowingly along with him. It is almost like the *passer*-poems themselves: we can either choose to see Ovid's joke, or we can choose not to. However that may be, I would submit that, in the long-standing debate over the obscene interpretation of Catullus' *passer*, Ovid may have something to add to the discussion.

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²⁴ See McKeown (n. 20), 108–10, with bibliography.

²⁵ See Boyd (n. 14), 204–5. As the anonymous referee points out, Ovid's Elysium is a place *obscaenae quo prohibentur aves* ('from which obscene birds are prohibited', *Am.* 2.6.52). If my interpretation of lines 19–20 is right, then this may have been a slight obstacle to the entry of Corinna's *psittacus*.