




RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Lesbia's Controversial Bird: Testing the Cases for and against *Passer* as Sparrow

Ashleigh Green 

Australian Catholic University  
Email: [asgreen@acu.edu.au](mailto:asgreen@acu.edu.au)

(Received 2 November 2020; accepted 27 January 2021)

### Abstract

The identity of the *passer* in Catullus 2 and 3 has been a subject of controversy for hundreds of years.<sup>1</sup> Sir D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, the great authority on birds in the ancient world, sums it up best with his own musings: 'Whatever Lesbia's "sparrow" may have been, I am pretty sure in my own mind [...] that it was not *Passer domesticus*, the most intractable and least amiable of cage-birds.'<sup>2</sup> Some scholars opt for an obscene interpretation of *passer*, while others argue that *passer* must refer to a bird like a bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*). To test the validity of these arguments, this paper examines four key components of the *passer* poems, and the *passer* debates. Firstly, it determines the Roman cultural view of sparrows and whether they regarded the birds as pets, pests, or something else entirely. Secondly, it analyses Roman trends in bird-keeping and looks for other examples of pet *passeres* in art and literature. Thirdly, it considers actual bird behaviour to reveal whether a sparrow could act the way Catullus describes. Finally, it analyses the different potential meanings of the word *passer* to determine which birds fell under its descriptive umbrella. In this way we can judge whether the *passer* was indeed a sparrow while also determining the place of sparrows in Roman thought and pet-keeping culture.

**Keywords:** Catullus; passer; pets; birds; bird-keeping; ornithology

---

<sup>1</sup> Gaisser (2007) 305–40 brings together a good range of responses to the *passer*, going as far back as the Early Modern period. Many scholars in the early twentieth century opted to identify the *passer* as a bird, but not a sparrow. See: Geike (1912), Havelock (1929), Jemison (1937), Thompson (1936). See also André (1967) and Toynbee (1973). For leading figures advocating the obscene interpretation, see: Giangrande (1975), Nadeau (1984), Hooper (1985), Mulroy (2002), Cocker (2013). Goold (1983) provides a commentary on these views, while Jocelyn (1980) and Jones (1998) offer the strongest arguments against the obscene *passer* view. Genovese (1974) argues that the *passer* can be taken in multiple ways. Adams (1982) 31–2 compiles obscene uses of *passer* in Latin.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson (1936) 16.

What is Lesbia's *passer*? It is a deceptively simple question, and the cause of many debates over the years. The enigmatic figure appears in two of Catullus' poems, 2 and 3. In one, he describes Lesbia playing with a *passer* to distract herself. In the other, he gives a lamentation for the creature's death.<sup>3</sup> Let us begin by quoting the poems in their entirety so that we have all the evidence regarding the *passer* in front of us.

Passer, deliciae meae puellae,  
 quicum ludere, quem in sinu tenere,  
 cui primum digitum dare appetenti  
 et acris solet incitare morsus,  
 cum desiderio meo nitenti  
 carum nescio quid lubet iocari  
 et solaciolum sui doloris,  
 credo, ut tum grauis acquiescat ardor:  
 tecum ludere sicut ipsa possem  
 et tristis animi leuare curas!

Catull. 2<sup>4</sup>

Sparrow, my girl's darling,  
 Whom she plays with, whom she cuddles,  
 Whom she likes to tempt with finger-  
 Tip and teases to nip harder  
 When my own bright-eyed desire  
 Fancies some endearing fun  
 And a small solace for her pain,  
 I suppose, so heavy a passion then rests:  
 Would I could play with you as she does  
 And lighten the spirit's gloomy cares!

And now the lamentation for its death:

Lugete, o Veneres Cupidinesque,  
 et quantum est hominum uenustiorum:  
 passer mortuus est meae puellae,  
 passer, deliciae meae puellae,  
 quem plus illa oculis suis amabat.  
 nam mellitus erat suamque norat  
 ipsam tam bene quam puella matrem,  
 nec sese a gremio illius mouebat,  
 sed circumsiliens modo huc modo illuc  
 ad solam dominam usque pipiabat;  
 qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum  
 illud unde negant redire quemquam.  
 at uobis male sit, malae tenebrae

<sup>3</sup> See Pomeroy (2003) for how it fits with other poetic lamentations for the death of a pet.

<sup>4</sup> Catull. 2 and 3 text from Mynors (1958); translations by Lee (1990).

Orci, quae omnia bella deuoratis:  
 tam bellum mihi passerem abstulistis.  
 o factum male! o miselle passer!  
 tua nunc opera meae puellae  
 flendo turgiduli rubent ocelli.

Catull. 3

Grieve, O Venuses and Loves  
 And all the lovelier people there are:  
 My girl's sparrow is dead,  
 Sparrow, my girl's darling,  
 Whom she loved more than her eyes.  
 For honey-sweet he was and knew his  
 Mistress well as a girl her mother,  
 Nor would he ever leave her lap  
 But hopping around, this way, that way,  
 Kept cheeping to his lady alone.  
 And now he's off on the dark journey  
 From which they say no one returns.  
 Shame on you, shameful dark of Orcus,  
 For gobbling up all the pretty things!  
 You've robbed me of so pretty a sparrow.  
 O what a shame! O wretched sparrow!  
 Your fault it is that now my girl's  
 Eyelids are swollen red with crying.

When considering the way the *passer* is portrayed, one is struck by its liveliness. It hops, nips, flutters, chirps, and demonstrates deep devotion to its mistress. It is also an object of affection, described as 'darling' and 'honey-sweet', and its death is mourned intensely by Lesbia. On the surface, this reads as a perfectly plausible sketch of a relationship between a woman and her beloved pet bird, though some disagree over whether *passer* should be translated as 'sparrow', preferring to identify it as a different type of bird. Geike, writing in 1912, states: 'There is some doubt as to what was the species of this bird. We can hardly suppose the capricious beauty to have given her affections to the most impudent, pugnacious, greedy and shrill-voiced of all European birds – the house-sparrow. It was probably one of the thrushes.'<sup>5</sup> Jennison, in 1937, suggests: 'Lesbia's *passer* was small and desirable, eminently tame and loving, and piped to his mistress (...) this should be the beautiful piping bullfinch.'<sup>6</sup> The bullfinch identification was taken up by Toynbee and survives as a popular identification to this day, even appearing in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.<sup>7</sup> Others believe that the *passer* is not a bird at all, but rather a sexual euphemism. This view became popular in the late twentieth

<sup>5</sup> Geike (1912) 197.

<sup>6</sup> Jennison (1937) 117.

<sup>7</sup> Toynbee (1973) 278; see OCD<sup>4</sup> s.v. 'pets' by S. White and S. Hornblower, 1118.

century and remains an important part of modern discussions about the *passer* poems.<sup>8</sup>

Identifying birds in ancient art and literature is a difficult undertaking. On the one hand, accurate identification is essential to reconstructing how Romans interacted with birds, but on the other hand it can be exceptionally difficult to pair ancient names with discrete species. Adding to the confusion is the way that ancient bird names and categorisation vary across time and place.<sup>9</sup> Thompson remains the leading figure in this endeavour, inspiring multiple works after him.<sup>10</sup> For Latin catalogues, one must refer to André's *Les noms d'oiseaux en latin* (1967) and Capponi's *Ornithologia Latina* (1979). Both authors agree that *passer* was an umbrella term for different species of sparrow, but above all referred to *Passer domesticus*. On Lesbia's *passer*, their opinions diverge as André names the blue rock thrush (*Monticola solitarius*) as a better choice.<sup>11</sup> Capponi's more rigorous ornithological approach leads him to maintain the species *Passer domesticus* as the most suitable bird for Lesbia's *passer*.<sup>12</sup> The most recent and comprehensive summary regarding *passeres* appears in Arnott's *Birds in the Ancient World from A to Z*.<sup>13</sup> Mynott's *Birds in the Ancient World* gives an excellent overview of the issues that surround identification, and on the subject of Lesbia's *passer* settles on the 'generic solution' that *passer* could function as vernacular for any small bird.<sup>14</sup>

As stated above, the purpose of this article is to test the validity of the various arguments surrounding the *passer* by referring to the original social context of Catullus' Rome as well as modern understandings of bird behaviour. Accordingly, one must acknowledge the recurring issue in scholarship, namely that alternatives are coloured by our own cultural norms and what we deem to be a suitable pet bird.<sup>15</sup> To overcome this, four key questions need to be answered:

1. What was the Roman cultural view of sparrows – did they see them as pests or pets?
2. Are there other references to *passeres* as pets?
3. Could a sparrow actually behave as Catullus describes?
4. Was the word *passer* used as a euphemism?

By situating Lesbia's *passer* in the context of wider Roman bird-keeping norms and referring to sparrow behaviour, we may be in a better position to appraise modern interpretations of the *passer*'s identity and determine the most suitable translation for the word *passer* in Catullus' poems.

<sup>8</sup> Giangrande (1975), Nadeau (1984), Hooper (1985), Mulroy (2002), Cocker (2013). See Goold (1983) 4 for commentary.

<sup>9</sup> Mynott (2018) 168–9.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson (1936); Martin (1914); Keller (1920); Toynbee (1973); Pollard (1977).

<sup>11</sup> André (1967) 120.

<sup>12</sup> Capponi (1979) 384–7.

<sup>13</sup> Arnott (2007) 227–8.

<sup>14</sup> Mynott (2018) 139–42.

<sup>15</sup> See Havelock (1929) 147 for an illustrative example.

## The Roman Cultural View of Sparrows

The first step in contextualising Catullus 2 and 3 is to ask how Romans viewed sparrows. Here we must set down our own cultural baggage, for the place of sparrows in the modern world is far removed from the classical experience. The spread of intensive agriculture and urbanisation has seen sparrows increase their range and abundance in a dramatic way. Across the majority of its modern range, the sparrow is an invasive species and considered a serious agricultural pest for the damage it does to crops and grain stores. It is also a vector for many diseases.<sup>16</sup> With classification as a serious pest come other stereotypes: they are dirty, or a nuisance, or simply unpleasant.<sup>17</sup> In the UK, where they are native birds, sparrows are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981, but individuals can still seek permission to remove or eradicate sparrows if they present a threat to agriculture or to public health and safety. Sparrows are also not caught, kept, or sold as pet birds. Such factors cause many modern readers to react with instinctive scepticism or disbelief at the idea of beautiful Lesbia devoting her time to a sparrow.

In contrast to our views, sparrows were held in esteem in the ancient Mediterranean. They had a special connection with the erotic, evident from Sappho's *Hymn to Aphrodite* where she playfully describes the goddess riding in a chariot drawn by sparrows (στροῦθοι). Some choose to translate στροῦθοι as 'swans' or 'doves',<sup>18</sup> plainly disliking the association of Aphrodite with such common birds, but sparrows suit the love goddess well.<sup>19</sup> These birds are prolific and their sexual habits are easily observable, making them perfect symbols of fecundity and lechery.<sup>20</sup> In *Lysistrata* (723–4), a sex-starved woman is said to be ready to fly off on a στρουθός.<sup>21</sup> In Rome, the birds were also considered salacious and said to love carnal pleasure.<sup>22</sup> 'Sparrow' could be a saucy pet name (Juv. 9.54). Venus was similarly surrounded by lusty sparrows, as in the following description from Apuleius: *currum deae prosequentes gannitu constrepenti lasciuiunt passerēs, et ceterae quae dulce cantitant aues melleis modulis suaue resonantes aduentum deae pronuntiant* ('Sparrows follow in the train of the goddess's chariot, frisking about with merry chirping; and all the other kinds of songbird too proclaim the goddess's approach by delightfully sounding their sweet melodies', Apul. *Met.* 6.6).<sup>23</sup> We

<sup>16</sup> See *Passer domesticus* in the Global Invasive Species Database (2021). One of the most dramatic examples of the modern tendency to categorise sparrows as pests can be seen in 1958 in China during The Great Leap Forward, where sparrows were systematically eradicated in the Four Pests Campaign in a bid to protect agricultural yields. See Fenby (2008) 400–1. The species targeted was *Passer montanus*.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson (2006) 270.

<sup>18</sup> For discussion, see Castle (1958) 71 and Zellner (2008). See Nagy (2020a) and (2020b) for images.

<sup>19</sup> On Catullus and Sappho's sparrows, see Brenk (1980) 712–13 and Ingleheart (2003) 555–6.

<sup>20</sup> Horapollon 2.115; Xenophanes 1.8.2.

<sup>21</sup> Putz (2014) 67.

<sup>22</sup> Plin. *HN* 10.107; Festus, *Gloss. Lat.* 410.17L; Cic. *Fin.* 2.75.

<sup>23</sup> Translation by Hanson (1996) 267.

are here reminded of Catullus inviting 'Venuses and Cupids' to mourn the passing of Lesbia's sparrow.

*Passer* could also be a term of endearment, and apparently in quite a wholesome sense. One example involves Marcus Aurelius addressing Gratia, the daughter of his tutor, Fronto.<sup>24</sup> Along with swallows (*Hirundo rustica*), sparrows served as domestic familiars in Roman houses. The two birds are depicted together in Roman art.<sup>25</sup> The domestic role of the sparrow is also mentioned in the Bible (Psalm 84:3) in a passage about the faithful yearning for the house of God. The link between sparrows, swallows, and the home is due to the fact that the birds nest in or on human houses.<sup>26</sup> As guests that were friendly to man and sharing his house, it was appropriate to extend Homer's laws of hospitality to swallows.<sup>27</sup> Romans tolerated or welcomed swallows in their houses and did not kill them out of respect.<sup>28</sup> They were under the protection of the household gods and perceived as being both wild and tame simultaneously.<sup>29</sup> We can extrapolate that Romans had few qualms about sharing their homes with sparrows, and that nesting and cohabitation inspired a greater depth of feeling. From these examples that associate *passeres* with Venus, the home, and objects of affection, we can conclude that the general cultural view of sparrows was positive. Any disbelieving automatic reaction to the image of Lesbia doting on a sparrow should be tempered by an appreciation of the fact that the Romans saw sparrows very differently to us.

### Pet Birds in the Roman Context

Whether it would have been appropriate for Lesbia to keep a pet sparrow also depends on an investigation of Roman bird-keeping culture. Was it common to keep birds? What kinds of birds were kept, and by whom? The picture is instantly complicated by the fact that there is no word for 'pet' in Latin the way that it exists in our own vocabulary. Animals were generally classified as wild or tame, kept for the purpose of work or pleasure.<sup>30</sup> The phrase that best expressed the idea of keeping a pet was *in deliciis habere*.<sup>31</sup> A pet was an animal that served no function except to bring delight to its owner. One is instantly reminded of the phrase *deliciae meae puellae* repeated twice in Catullus – 'my girl's delight', or perhaps, 'my girl's pet'.

Birds in general were highly desirable pets in the Roman world. They afforded pleasure through song, appearance, and companionship. In Latin literature there are more references to pet birds than all other kinds of pet put together.<sup>32</sup> There was even the concept of being *in aues morbosus* – 'bird-crazy' (Petron. *Sat.* 46). In the Imperial period, it became a popular pastime to acquire

<sup>24</sup> Apul. *Met.* 10.22, Fronto, *Ep.* 4.6.2, Plaut. *Asin.* 666, Plaut. *Cas.* 138.

<sup>25</sup> Mynott (2018) 169. See plate 3.11 on this page for a visual representation.

<sup>26</sup> Romans classed birds that raised their chicks in Italy or abroad separately. See Varro, *Rust.* 3.5.7. *Isid. Etym.* 12.7.1 calls sparrows indigenous birds because they do not migrate.

<sup>27</sup> Ael. *NA* 1.52; Hom. *Od.* 15.72–4.

<sup>28</sup> Ael. *NA* 1.58; Ov. *Ars am.* 2.149–50.

<sup>29</sup> Ael. *NA* 10.34.

<sup>30</sup> *Dig.* 41.1.4, 41.1.5, 41.1.44. Clark (2007) 139.

<sup>31</sup> Cic. *Div.* 1.76; Sen. *Apocol.* 13.3.

<sup>32</sup> Johnson (1968) 98; Jashemski (1979) 107.

talking birds, from parrots to ravens.<sup>33</sup> Pliny records the labour-intensive method of teaching birds how to speak.<sup>34</sup> Jays (*Garrulus glandarius*) are natural mimics, and these were popularly confined in cages and hung above doorways to greet visitors.<sup>35</sup> Pigeons were a perennial favourite.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, those who spent fortunes on pet birds were met with more tolerance than those who lavished money on table birds:

Quamquam uel hos magis tolerabiles putem, qui oblectamenta deliciarum possidendi habendique causa graui aere et argento pensent, quam illos qui Ponticum Phasim et Scythica stagna Maeotidis eluant; iam nunc Gangeticas et Aegyptias aues temulenter eructant.

Columella, *Rust.* 8.8.10<sup>37</sup>

[...] though I should regard those people who pay great sums in copper and silver for the pleasure which their pets give them merely because they own and possess them, as less insufferable than those who clear of all their birds the river Phasis in Pontus and the pools of Lake Maeotis in Scythia; nay, they are now in their drunkenness belching forth birds brought from the Ganges and from Egypt.

When we choose a pet, consciously or not we ‘communicate a great deal about the way we view the world and our place in it’.<sup>38</sup> In Rome, whether it was socially acceptable for an individual to keep a particular bird depended on one’s class, sex, and age. These factors frequently converged, as we see in Plautus’ *The Captives* when the character Tyndarus sets up a joke about being given a ‘crowbar’, *quasi patriciis pueris aut monerulae aut anites aut coturnices dantur quicum lusitent* (‘just as patrician boys are given jackdaws or ducks or quails to play with...’, *Plaut. Capt.* 1002–3).<sup>39</sup> Pet birds were fine companions for children, but if elites could provide their offspring with pets that were expensive and difficult to procure, so much the better. Pliny the Younger describes the funeral of a boy:

Habebat puer mannulos multos et iunctos et solutos, habebat canes maiores minoresque, habebat lusciniias psittacos merulas; omnes Regulus circa rogam truncidauit. Nec dolor erat ille, sed ostentatio doloris  
Plin. *Ep.* 4.2.3–4<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Mart. 14.73, 3.95.1–2; Ov. *Am.* 2.6; Plin. *HN* 10.114, 121–3; Stat. *Silv.* 2.4.

<sup>34</sup> Plin. *HN* 10.120; see also Fögen (2014) 224.

<sup>35</sup> Mart. 14.76; Plin. *HN* 10.118–19. See also Petron. *Sat.* 28 where a *pica uaria* greets visitors. This is a magpie, which can only be trained to speak with great difficulty in contrast to ordinary jays, which can mimic human speech without training. The joke seems to be that Trimalchio is so wealthy that he is not content with an ordinary *pica* greeting his guests. For the difference between *pica* and *pica uaria*, see Plin. *HN* 10.78.

<sup>36</sup> Varro, *Rust.* 3.7.10; Columella, *Rust.* 8.8.10.

<sup>37</sup> Text and translation from Forster and Heffner (1954) 367.

<sup>38</sup> Reitz and Wing (2008) 286.

<sup>39</sup> Translation by de Melo (2011) 613. In Latin, ‘crowbar’ is *upupa*, a word that also means hoopoe.

<sup>40</sup> Text and translation from Radice (1969) 245.

The boy used to possess a number of Gallic ponies for riding and driving, also dogs of all sizes, and nightingales, parrots and blackbirds; Regulus had them all slaughtered round his pyre. That was not grief, but parade of grief.

In this example, we see clearly how the father uses his son's expensive pets to make a spectacle of his grief. The desire and ability to procure and keep a particular bird were defined by one's means and status, and there are many other examples of elites, including the Imperial family, seeking rare or ostentatious birds.<sup>41</sup>

Overwhelmingly, birds were depicted in the company of children.<sup>42</sup> Boys and girls kept birds from when they were *infantes* to when they were teenagers.<sup>43</sup> Domestic poultry were the commonest pets.<sup>44</sup> Art suggests that children were very young when first given birds. Often they are little more than toddlers clutching birds in their chubby fists. Goslings, ducks, chickens and pigeons are commonly seen with *infantes*, probably because they are harmless and easy to handle. As the child grew older, they might be given more exotic or delicate pets that required greater care.<sup>45</sup> If the family had a natural pond on their property or a garden with water features, they might keep pet ducks, which were depicted with boys in art.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps because children were given birds when they were very young, it appears that as they grew older it became less acceptable for them to dote on their pets. A teenage boy could not neglect his education in favour of playing with animals, as we see in the story of a blithe young man who is mad for birds and spends all his time whistling to his blackbirds and nightingales and teaching his pets to talk instead of focusing on his own schooling. What is the world coming to, the author asks, when his birds are more eloquent than he is! (Philostr. VA 6.36). In the *Satyricon*, during a long-winded speech the freedman Echion declares to his fellow dinner guests that *ingeniosus est et bono filo, etiam si in aues morbosus est. Ego illi iam tres cardeles occidi, et dixi quia mustella comedit* ('[My son is] a clever lad and made of good quality, even if he has an almost unhealthy interest in birds. I've already killed three of his finches and said that a weasel ate them', Petron. Sat. 46).<sup>47</sup> This passage is mocking the freedman for his pretensions, but we can gather that part of a boy's maturation involved putting aside such sentimental pursuits. This is not to say that keeping birds was unacceptable in teens and adults, merely that it had to be engaged in moderation, lest one fall victim to idleness and luxury.

<sup>41</sup> Plin. *HN* 10.120, 10.141–2; Plut. *Mor.* 978A. Macrob. *Sat.* 2.4.29–30. Beagon (2014) 433; Fögen (2014) 225.

<sup>42</sup> Rawson (2003) 130.

<sup>43</sup> Bradley (1998) 526–7.

<sup>44</sup> Apul. *Met.* 8.15, Plaut. *Asin.* 666, Plin. *Pan.* 26.7. See Cooley (2014) 245 for faunal remains of birds recovered at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

<sup>45</sup> Plaut. *Capt.* 1002–3; Plin. *Ep.* 4.2.3–4.

<sup>46</sup> Jashemski (1993) 153, 154, 165, 232.

<sup>47</sup> Translation by Schmeling (2020) 153. The birds in question are goldfinches (*Carduelis carduelis*).



When it comes to pet *passeres*, there are a handful of references. In Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (8.15), sparrows are listed among various young or weak household animals like kids, chicks, and puppies that must be carried when moving to a new home. Pliny the Younger refers obliquely to 'little sparrows' and 'little doves' caged as pets (Plin. *Ep.* 9.25.3). Martial brags that the pet dove of his friend Stella surpasses even the sparrow of Catullus (Mart. 1.7). While the latter two are not particularly compelling since they engage more with poetry than with real birds, Fronto gives us clear proof in a private letter, where he says of his grandson:

Auicularum etiam cupidissimus est; pullis gallinarum columbarum passerum oblectatur, quo studio me a prima infantia deuinctum fuisse saepe audiui ex eis qui mihi educatores aut magistri fuerunt.

Fronto, *Ep.* 1.12<sup>48</sup>

He is also devoted to little birds; he delights in chickens, young pigeons, and sparrows. I have often heard from those who were my tutors and masters that I had from my earliest infancy a passion for such things.

In Apuleius we have a picture of *passeres* being a regular part of the household, while Fronto indicates that it was both normal and encouraged to give them to children for play. House sparrows are abundant and live alongside humans, so acquiring captive sparrows would have been a simple task. We even have descriptions of bird-catchers going after sparrows' nests, presumably to procure eggs or chicks for sale (Ael. *NA* 4.38; see also *Edictum de pretiis rerum uenaliū*, 4.37). But was it acceptable for adult women – especially noblewomen – to keep sparrows? Martial gives us a clue when he satirises the sentimentality people harboured for their pets:

Si meus aurita gaudet lagalopece Flaccus,  
 si fruitur tristi Canius Aethiope;  
 Publius exiguae si flagrat amore catellae,  
 si Cronius similen cercopithecon amat;  
 delectat Marium si perniciosus ichneumon,  
 pica salutatrix si tibi, Lause, placet;  
 si gelidum collo nectit Cadilla draconem,  
 lusciniū tumulum si Telesilla dedit:  
 blanda Cupidinei cur non amet ora Labyrtae  
 qui uidet haec dominis monstra placere suis?

Mart. 7.87<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Text and translation from Haines (1920) 173. Fronto goes on to say that in his old age, he has developed a fondness for keeping partridges.

<sup>49</sup> Text and translation from Shackleton Bailey (1993) 143. However, I have amended the translation so that *pica* is rendered correctly as jay.

If my Flaccus delights in a long-eared fennec, if Canius enjoys a sombre Ethiopian, if Publius is a-fire with love for a tiny lapdog, if Cronius adores a long-tailed monkey that resembles him, if a destructive ichneumon charms Marius, if a jay that can speak your name pleases you, Lausus, if Glaucilla twines a clammy snake about her neck, if Telesilla gave a tomb to a nightingale, why should not anyone who sees these freaks pleasing their owners not love the face of Cupid's Labyrtas?

We can say with confidence that Romans delighted in pet birds, including *passeres*, but that sentimental pet-keeping was for children. In adults, such behaviour could be tolerated, but it was also the subject of ridicule. In such a context where households had access to sparrows and children regularly played with them, it is perfectly feasible for Lesbia to have had a pet sparrow, but her devotion to it can be construed as childish and overly emotional.

### Natural Sparrow Behaviour

Now that we have shown *passeres* were kept as pets, we can analyse whether Lesbia's *passer* exhibits behaviour typical of a sparrow. There are a few clues to betray its identity. It is depicted as nestling in Lesbia's lap, nibbling at her fingers and chirping to her – *pipiare* (*OLD*<sup>2</sup> s.vv. *pipio* and *pipo*). This is a rare verb worth noting because although it can be translated as chirp, cheep, or pipe, it cannot be translated as 'sing'.<sup>50</sup> This spells trouble for some of the proposed alternative translations of *passer*.<sup>51</sup> The blue rock thrush is certainly a beautiful bird that becomes deeply attached to its owner,<sup>52</sup> but it does not chirp – it warbles and sings, and it is much larger, almost the size of a blackbird. It is more likely to have been classed as a *turdus* than a *passer*. As for the bullfinch, these birds do not have naturally tuneful songs, but if hand-raised and whistled to, they can learn to perform striking melodies. However, we have no evidence that Romans tamed bullfinches. Evidence of the method of taming and 'whistling bullfinches' only appears to stretch to the Middle Ages.<sup>53</sup> The inclination to identify *passer* as bullfinch stems from authors of the early twentieth century, who were discussing Catullus at a time when bullfinches were familiar, popular, and coveted pets.<sup>54</sup>

The most striking trait of the *passer* is its devotion to Lesbia. While it is true that sparrows generally do not make amiable pets, especially when contrasted against alternatives, there is still a way that a sparrow could behave as Catullus describes. Sparrows taken from the wild are fragile and difficult to train, but a hand-reared sparrow would exhibit deep attachment to Lesbia. That is, if Lesbia reared a sparrow chick, it would be tame, affectionate, and devoted to her. This is perhaps even intimated in the way Catullus says the bird

<sup>50</sup> In Columella, *Rust.* 8.5.14 it refers to chicks peeping within their eggs. The word was also applied to children. See: Tert. *De monog.*16. For discussion, refer to Mynott (2018) 140.

<sup>51</sup> Jennison (1937) 117, Innes (1952) 78.

<sup>52</sup> Fordyce (1961) 88–9.

<sup>53</sup> Birkhead (2014) 68.

<sup>54</sup> Birkhead (2011) 238–43.

knew Lesbia as well as a girl knows her own mother.<sup>55</sup> Raising a sparrow chick would be a demanding task, but if accomplished successfully it would engender such behaviour as fluttering around and on Lesbia, and only chirping for her. Hand-reared birds also sexually imprint on humans. Imprinting is a learning process in young birds that involves rapid attachment during a 'sensitive period' to a mother figure.<sup>56</sup> The most famous studies on imprinting were conducted on geese by animal behaviourist Konrad Lorenz. When humans raise birds from the moment they are hatched, they become sexually stunted as they fixate on humans rather than their own kind. In the ancient world, the attachment of imprinted birds was often attributed to them being 'in love' with their human.<sup>57</sup> This would contribute to the erotic undertones of the poem and the sense that this sparrow loves Lesbia as a mate, making him Catullus' rival.

Was it common for women to hand-raise birds in Rome? According to Pliny, Empress Livia nursed a hen's egg in her bosom when she was pregnant with Tiberius:

Quin et ab homine perficiuntur. Iulia Augusta prima sua iuuenta Ti. Caesare ex Nerone grauida, cum parere uirilem sexum admodum cuperet, hoc usa est puellari augurio, ouum in sinu fouendo atque, cum deponendum haberet, nutrici per sinum tradendo ne intermitteretur tepor; nec falso augurata proditur.

Plin. *HN* 10.154<sup>58</sup>

Moreover eggs can be hatched even by a human being. Julia Augusta in her early womanhood was with child with Tiberius Caesar by Nero, and being specially eager to a bear a baby of the male sex she employed the following method of prognostication used by girls – she cherished an egg in her bosom and when she had to lay it aside passed it to a nurse under the folds of their dresses, so that the warmth might not be interrupted; and it is said that her prognostication came true.

Pliny means that she hatched out a rooster. Suetonius also tells this story, remarking that she hatched out a male chick with a splendid comb (*Tib.* 14). Even if this particular story is a fabrication, it would seem that it was a practice common to women and girls, for in the same passage Pliny goes on to wonder if this method of hatching birds' eggs was what led to the invention of artificial incubation and the use of fire to keep eggs warm.<sup>59</sup> We therefore have evidence that high-born ladies could hatch birds' eggs and raise the chicks if they were so inclined. Although at first glance it may not seem that a sparrow could

<sup>55</sup> On this imagery, see Johnson (2003) and Vinson (1989).

<sup>56</sup> Birkhead (2011) 94.

<sup>57</sup> Ael. *NA* 7.41; Plin. *HN* 10.26.

<sup>58</sup> Text and translation from Rackham (1940) 391.

<sup>59</sup> Romans had sophisticated incubation techniques and regularly managed and manipulated egg hatching in chickens, ducks, peafowl, geese, and other barnyard birds. See Columella, *Rust.* 8.5 and Varro, *Rust.* 3.9.

behave in the way Lesbia's *passer* does, we must remember that hand-rearing and imprinting could easily account for this.

### Possible Meanings of the Word *Passer*

Our last task is to ask: to what does the word *passer* refer? We shall deal with the obvious first: was the word *passer* an obscenity? There is a small amount of evidence on this front. Some indication exists that *passer* could function as a euphemism for *mentula*, though it is not particularly convincing. *Strutheum* was a Greek loan word that functioned as obscene, and *passero* and *passera* function as obscenities in modern Italian.<sup>60</sup> The strongest example comes from a sexual scene in Apuleius: "*Teneo te,*" inquit *teneo, meum palumbulum, meum passerem*" ('Finally she said, "I am holding you, I am holding you, my little dove, my sparrow,"' Apul. *Met.* 10.22).<sup>61</sup> Most of the sexual energy attached to the word seems to be derived from its known connection to Aphrodite rather than the fact it was a blatant obscenity, however. The pre-existing erotic symbolism of the sparrow allows Catullus to be playful, which might be why he says playing with the bird diverts Lesbia from amorous thoughts.<sup>62</sup> But an obscene interpretation is, on the strength of it, not particularly compelling, especially since extended allegories are not found anywhere else in Catullus.<sup>63</sup>

Leaving aside possible obscenities, let us examine which birds fell under the umbrella of *passer*. Roman categorisation and identification of birds were different to our own and varied locally and temporally too. We can say generally that *passer* and στρουθός both referred to sparrows. Aristotle describes only one στρουθός, a bird that dusts itself and washes, copulates swiftly, and has males with black heads – *Passer domesticus* (Arist. *Hist. an.* 633b.4–5; 539b33; 613a29–b2). Pliny writes of *passeres* as amorous little birds that have black heads and hop along the ground, again *Passer domesticus* (*HN* 10.107, 111). Where things become strange is when we consider that in Greek, the ostrich was the στρουθοκάμηλος – camel sparrow.<sup>64</sup> In Latin the ostrich was *marinus passer* – sparrow from overseas. It seems *passer* and στρουθός could function as generalising terms for many kinds of birds. But though it has the general meaning of bird, *passer* primarily indicated little brown birds.<sup>65</sup> In Roman paintings, brown birds that elude identification still look out at us.<sup>66</sup> Dunnock, twite, linnet, tree sparrow, house sparrow, Italian sparrow – all

<sup>60</sup> Adams (1982) 31–3.

<sup>61</sup> Translation by Hanson (1989) 211. *Teneo* can also function as a sexual verb in some contexts: see Adams (1982) 181.

<sup>62</sup> See Mart. 11.6 for comparison, where *passer* is used unambiguously as a euphemism.

<sup>63</sup> Jones (1998) 188–9.

<sup>64</sup> For full discussion and sources, refer to Arnott (2007) 227–30.

<sup>65</sup> Aët. 11.11 specifically lists a *passer* that is the smallest of birds besides the wren. *Isid. Etym.* 12.7.68 simply says *passeres* are small birds.

<sup>66</sup> Tammisto (1997) provides a catalogue of birds in Roman mosaics. The garden scenes from the *triclinium* of the Villa of Livia, now held in the Palazzo Massimo, are full of little brown birds. Sparrows are common in Campanian wall paintings, with The House of the Golden Bracelet at Pompeii offering clear examples. See also inv. 9661 and 2870 at the Naples Archaeological Museum.

would have fallen under the *passer* umbrella.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, *Passer domesticus* remains the foremost identification, and though this word occasionally functioned as obscene the usage was rare.

## Conclusion

What was the Roman cultural view of sparrows? Overall, it was positive. They were linked with the home due to their tendency to live in or on human households the same way swallows did. Observation of their amorous behaviours led Romans and Greeks alike to associate them with Aphrodite/Venus. This association has a long pedigree and gives a sexual edge to sparrow symbolism. However, *passer* was also an appropriate pet name for a child, meaning that *passer* could be innocent or lewd depending on the context.

Are there other references to *passeres* as pets? Yes. There are a number of them. Bird-keeping was immensely popular, and children in particular kept little birds and *passeres*, playing with them from earliest childhood. Adult men and women could also keep birds, but a look at the trends in bird-keeping reveals that it was generally considered a foolish sentimental pursuit that could be tolerated but not encouraged. Part of the maturation process involved boys giving up pet birds, although women could indulge in the pastime with less stigma. Nevertheless, the overwhelming connection between *passeres* and children suggests Lesbia comes across as childish for playing with a silly bird, and later, for lamenting its death.

Could a sparrow behave as Catullus describes? Yes. A wild-caught sparrow would be very difficult to train and keep alive, but a sparrow that was hatched or taken from the nest as a fledgling to be hand-raised would behave the way Lesbia's sparrow does. Hand-taming a young sparrow would result in a deeper emotional connection, and Catullus even describes Lesbia as being like a mother to it. There are references to other high-born ladies hatching eggs by warming them in their bosom, meaning such an endeavour is entirely possible. Furthermore, the bird is described as chirping and no mention is made of warbling or singing that would better describe a thrush or bullfinch. It hops and flutters as a sparrow would too.

Was the word *passer* used as a euphemism? Yes, but only in a few rare examples. Mostly, *passer* described little brown birds, and above all *Passer domesticus*. On the whole, 'sparrow' is an excellent translation of *passer*. Given the way Romans categorised birds, we have no way of settling on an exact species, but our word sparrow, like *passer*, is a good catch-all that encompasses the likeliest options of *Passer domesticus*, *Passer Italiae*, *Passer montanus* and *Passer hispaniolensis*. The sexual energy in the poem is likely generated by the subtle association of sparrows with Venus rather than outright euphemism since such extended metaphors are rare in Catullus and *passer* as euphemism only appears occasionally – fewer times than references to pet *passeres*, one hastens to add. On the balance of evidence, the identity of Lesbia's sparrow is most likely the common house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) or the Italian sparrow

<sup>67</sup> See Mynott (2018) 139–42 for discussion.

(*Passer italiae*). This paper has shown that Romans regularly kept and delighted in sparrows, viewing them in a broadly positive light. There is no compelling reason to dismiss the idea that Lesbia kept one for herself, and in fact Catullus' poem makes an excellent springboard from which to consider the social and cultural implications of bird-keeping in Roman society.

## Bibliography

- Adams, J. N. (1982), *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*. London.
- Anderson, T. R. (2006), *Biology of the Ubiquitous House Sparrow: from Genes to Populations*. Oxford.
- André, J. (1967), *Les noms d'oiseaux en latin*. Paris.
- Arnett, W. G. (2007), *Birds in the Ancient World from A to Z*. London/New York.
- Beagon, M. (2014), 'Wondrous Animals in Antiquity', in G. L. Campbell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*. Oxford, 414–40.
- Birkhead, T. R. (2011), *The Wisdom of Birds: An Illustrated History of Ornithology*, London.
- Birkhead, T. R. (2014), *The Red Canary: The Story of the First Genetically Engineered Animal*. London.
- Bradley, K. (1998), 'The Sentimental Education of the Roman Child: The Role of Pet-Keeping', *Latomus* 57, 523–57.
- Brenk, F. E. (1980), 'Non Primus Pipiat: Echoes of Sappho in Catullus' Passer Poems', *Latomus* 39, 702–16.
- Capponi, F. (1979), *Ornithologia Latina*. Genova.
- Castle, W. (1958), 'Observations on Sappho's to Aphrodite', *TAPhA* 89, 66–76.
- Clark, G. (2007), 'Philosophers' Pets: Porphyry's Partridge and Augustine's Dog', in T. Fögen and E. Thomas (eds.), *Interactions between Animals and Humans in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*. Berlin, 139–58.
- Cocker, M. (2013), *Birds and People*. London.
- Cooley, A. (2014), *Pompeii: A Sourcebook*. London/New York.
- de Melo, W. (tr.) (2011), *Plautus: Amphitryon. The Comedy of Asses. The Pot of Gold. The Two Bacchises. The Captives*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA.
- Fenby, J. (2008), *The Penguin History of Modern China*. Cambridge.
- Fögen, T. (2014), 'Animal Communication', in G. L. Campbell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*. Oxford, 216–33.
- Fordeyce, C. (ed.) (1961), *Catullus: A Commentary*. Oxford.
- Forster, E. F. and Heffner, E. H. (tr.) (1954), *Columella: On Agriculture, Volume II: Books 5–9*. Cambridge.
- Gaisser, J. H. (ed.) (2007), *Catullus*. Oxford.
- Geike, A. (1912), *The Love of Nature Among the Romans*. London.
- Genovese, E. N. (1974), 'Symbolism in the Passer Poems', *Maia* 26, 121–5.
- Giangrande, G. (1975), 'Catullus' Lyrics on the Passer,' *Museum Philologum Londiniense* 1, 137–46.
- Global Invasive Species Database (2021), Species profile: *Passer domesticus*. Viewed 30 April 2021, <http://www.iucngisd.org/gisd/species.php?sc=420>.
- Goold, G. P. (ed.) (1983), *Catullus*. London.
- Haines, C. R. (tr.) (1920), *Fronto: Correspondence, Volume II*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA.
- Hanson, A. (tr.) (1989), *Apuleius: Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass), Volume II: Books 7–11*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA.
- Hanson, A. (tr.) (1996), *Apuleius: Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass), Volume I: Books 1–6*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA.
- Havelock, E. (1929), *The Lyric Genius of Catullus*. New York.
- Hooper, R. W. (1985), 'In Defence of Catullus' Dirty Sparrow', *G&R* 32, 162–78.
- Ingleheart, J. (2003), 'Catullus 2 and 3: A Programmatic Pair of Sapphic Epigrams?', *Mnemosyne* 56, 551–65.
- Innes, M. (1952), 'Deliciae Meae Puellae', *G&R* 21, 78–85.
- Jashemski, W. (1979), *The Gardens of Pompeii, Herculaneum and the Villas Destroyed by Vesuvius*. Vol. 1. New York.

- Jashemski, W. (1993), *The Gardens of Pompeii, Herculaneum and the Villas Destroyed by Vesuvius*, Vol. 2. New York.
- Jennison, G. (1937), *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome*. Manchester.
- Jocelyn, H. D. (1980), 'On Some Unnecessarily Indecent Interpretations of Catullus 2 and 3', *AJPh* 101, 421–41.
- Johnson, L. R. (1968), *Aviaries and Aviculture in Ancient Rome*. Ann Arbor.
- Johnson, M. (2003), 'Catullus 2b: The Development of a Relationship in the *Passer* Trilogy', *CJ* 99, 11–34.
- Jones, J. (1998), 'Catullus' *Passer* as *Passer*', *G&R* 45, 188–94.
- Keller, O. (1920), *Die antike Tierwelt*. Leipzig.
- Lee, G. (tr.) (1990), *The Poems of Catullus*. Oxford.
- Martin, E. W. (1914), *The Birds of Latin Poets*. California.
- Mynott, J. (2018), *Birds in the Ancient World: Winged Words*. Oxford.
- Mulroy, D. (2002), *The Complete Poetry of Catullus*. Wisconsin.
- Mynors, R. A. B. (ed.) (1958), *C. Valerii Catulli: Carmina*. Oxford.
- Nagy, G. (2020a), 'From the Heavenly to the Earthly and Back, Variations on a Theme of Love-on-wings in Song 1 of Sappho and Elsewhere', *Classical Inquiries*, 18 December 2020 [Blog]. Available at [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical\\_Inquiries](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries).
- Nagy, G. (2020b) 'Back and Forth from General to Special Kinds of Erotic Love, Further Variations on a Theme of Love-on-wings in Song 1 of Sappho and Elsewhere', *Classical Inquiries*, 25 December 2020 [Blog]. Available at [http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical\\_Inquiries](http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hul.eresource:Classical_Inquiries).
- Nadeau, Y. (1984), 'Catullus' Sparrow, Martial, Juvenal and Ovid', *Latomus* 43, 861–8.
- Pollard, J. (1977), *Birds in Greek Life and Myth*. Colorado.
- Pomeroy, A. J. (2003), 'Heavy Petting in Catullus', *Arethusa* 36, 49–60.
- Putz, B. (2014), 'Good to Laugh With: Animals in Comedy', in G. L. Campbell (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life*. Oxford, 61–73.
- Rackham, H. (tr.) (1940), *Pliny: Natural History, Volume III: Books 8–11*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA.
- Radice, B. (tr.) (1969), *Pliny the Younger: Letters, Volume I: Books 1–7*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA.
- Rawson, B. (2003), *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy*. Oxford.
- Reitz, E. and Wing, E. (2008), *Zooarchaeology*. Cambridge/New York.
- Schmeling, G. (tr.) (2020), *Petronius, Seneca: Satyricon. Apocolocyntosis*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA.
- Shackleton Bailey, D. R. (tr.) (1993), *Martial: Epigrams, Volume II: Books 6–10*. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA.
- Tammisto, A. (1997), *Birds in Mosaics: A Study on the Representation of Birds in Hellenistic and Romano-Campanian Tessellated Mosaics to the Early Augustan Age*. Rome.
- Thompson, D. W. (1936), *A Glossary of Greek Birds*. London.
- Toynbee, J. M. C. (1973), *Animals in Roman Life and Art*. Ithaca, NY.
- Vinson, M. P. (1989), 'And Baby Makes Three? Parental Imagery in the Lesbia Poems of Catullus', *CJ* 85, 47–53.
- Zellner, H. (2008), 'Sappho's Sparrows', *CW* 101, 435–42.

---

**Cite this article:** Green A (2021). Lesbia's Controversial Bird: Testing the Cases for and against *Passer* as Sparrow. *Antichthon* 55, 6–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ann.2021.7>