

This paper examines the semiotic function of Flavius' bed in Catullus 6, a curious article of furniture whose depicted speech act supplies the central image of the poem (Nielsen 1984, Fitzgerald 1995). Its similarity to the speaking door in poem 67 suggests that Catullus is interested here in exploring the social dynamics of gossip: specifically, how the spread of salacious rumors depends more upon the intrusive nosiness of scandalmongers than upon actual deeds. In effect, Catullus playfully articulates a serious message in poem 6 regarding the ability of external observers to shape the public perception of one's private conduct, which qualifies somewhat his defiance of public opinion in the surrounding "kiss" poems (5 and 7).

Catullus begins poem 6 by asserting that Flavius must be ashamed of his girlfriend, since he refuses to talk about her (6.1-5). Catullus claims nevertheless to deduce her existence, in part because Flavius' bed "shouts" what he has been up to (*nam te non viduas iacere noctes / nequiquam tacitum cubile clamat*, 6.6-7). At first glance this may appear to be simply one of several physical clues to Flavius' affair (6.7-11), but the bed is noteworthy for its personification: Catullus not only gives it a voice but hints at a conscious motive when he suggests that the bed tried to keep quiet about its owner's activities (*nequiquam tacitum*). The bed may be the primary source for Catullus' gleeful exposure of Flavius, but it only reveals its secrets once Catullus has launched his investigation into Flavius' personal business (Forsyth 1989, Newman 1990, Wray 2001, Holzberg 2002).

Although Thomson 1997 compares Flavius to the house door of poem 67, a more suggestive parallel can be drawn between the door and Flavius' bed. The garrulous door eagerly regales its anonymous interlocutor with lurid tales of the farrago of sexual and marital misconduct that characterized the household of its previous owner (67.7-20 and ff.). Even so, Catullus makes it clear that the door does not bear sole responsibility for this airing of dirty laundry; it is the interlocutor who aggressively insists on hearing all the sordid details (67.15-18). Indeed, the veracity of the charges matters less than Catullus' depiction of the way in which prurient gossip can seize upon even wild rumors in order to forge a damaging public narrative about private misbehavior (Skinner 2003).

In similar fashion, Catullus uses a shifting array of terms in poem 6 to describe Flavius' girlfriend and their affair (*deliciae, scortum, non viduae noctes, stuprum, ineptiae, amores*) in such a way as to create a general impression of sexual impropriety rather than a clear picture of a specific relationship (Adams 1982, Krostenko 2001). As a result, the focus of attention shifts away from the particulars of the affair and towards Catullus' impertinent scrutiny of the physical evidence in Flavius' bedroom as an amused yet judgmental outside observer (Morgan 1977, cf. Smith 1998). The image of the shouting bed thus represents a central feature in Catullus' extrapoetic attempt to control the interpretation and thus the meaning of Flavius' behavior (Evrard-Gillis 1977, Skinner 1983), in a self-deprecating subversion of the poet's bold dismissals of potential critics of his own affair with Lesbia in poems 5 and 7.