CATULLUS AND THE POETICS OF ROMAN MANHOOD

This book applies comparative cultural and literary models to a reading of Catullus’ poems as social performances of a “poetics of manhood”: a competitively, often outrageously, self-allusive bid for recognition and admiration. Earlier readings of Catullus, based on Romantic and Modernist notions of “lyric” poetry, have tended to focus on the relationship with Lesbia and to ignore the majority of the shorter poems, which are instead directed at other men. Professor Wray approaches these poems in the light of new models for understanding male social interaction in the premodern Mediterranean, placing them in their specifically Roman historical context while bringing out their strikingly “postmodern” qualities. The result is a new way of reading the fiercely aggressive and delicately refined agonism performed in Catullus’ shorter poems. All Latin and Greek quoted is supplied with an English translation.

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First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset in Baskerville and New Hellenic Greek [A0]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Wray, David, 1959-
Catullus and the poetics of Roman manhood / David Wray.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
isbn 0 521 66127 7
1. Title.
PA6276.W73 2001
874'.01 – dc21 2001025549

isbn 0 521 66127 7 hardback
D · M · S
Louise Scott Wray
1931–1997

Deiner Mutter Seele schwebt voraus.
Deiner Mutter Seele hilft die Nacht umschiffen,
Riff um Riff.

Paul Celan
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Preface

Like Catullus himself, this book about his poems came to maturity in exciting times. A first version of it, well under way when the monographs of Paul Allen Miller and Micaela Janan gave their names to a Catullan year, had only just been submitted as a dissertation when William Fitzgerald’s *Provisions* first came into my hands. Since that time, ongoing dialogue with these refined and complex Catullan voices, and with others as well, has brought fuller elaboration and sharper focus to the critical views expressed in these pages. But exciting times never come as an unmingled gift of fortune, and what began as a revision for publication took, in the event, nearly as long as the original writing. The end result is not so much a rewritten book as a new one.

By all accounts, Catullus still commands a wider audience than any other Latin poet. I have written with a varied readership in mind throughout, perhaps especially in the first two chapters on literary and critical constructions and receptions of the Catullan corpus and its author. The second chapter’s discussion of Louis Zukofsky and postmodern poetics, while ultimately crucial to the broader arguments of the book, keeps Catullus’ own words largely out of the debate for a longer time than some readers may have expected. Patience and indulgence, if tested in Chapter 2, will, I hope, be compensated in Chapter 3, where the contours of a Catullan poetics of manhood are traced through a sustained and nearly exclusive focus on the text of the poems. Chapter 4 brings comparative material drawn from the work of cultural anthropologists to bear on a delineation of what has always seemed to me a defining and irreducible aspect of Catullus’ poems: the aggression personated by their speaker. It was Marion Kuntz who, as a dissertation reader, first suggested to me the idea of eventually attempting to situate Catullan invective in a comparative Medi-
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terranean context. That advice is among the many debts I owe her, and the line of inquiry is one I think might fruitfully be taken much further in a separate study. The fifth and final chapter, on Archilochian and Callimachean intertextual presences as “code models” of manhood in Catullus, poses the question of what remains of the “Catullan persona” after the collapse of the critical and metaphysical certainties that underpinned Modernist “persona criticism,” and offers a partial answer to that question in a postmodern model of Roman manhood, and selfhood, as performance. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

I come to the end of this project owing much to many, and owning no coin of payment other than gratitude. Richard Thomas (as director), Marion Kuntz and Richard Tarrant read the dissertation and made all manner of unlikely things possible. Others who have kindly read all or part of various and variant versions, and who have improved the end result by encouragement, advice, championing or challenge include, in more or less chronological order, Gregory Nagy, Ralph Johnson, Robert Kaster, Peter White, Richard Saller, Shadi Bartsch, Robert von Hallberg, Niklas Holzberg and Brian Krostenko. I am grateful to the Press’s two anonymous readers for their thorough, insightful and everywhere helpful criticism, to Michael Sharp for unflagging patience and enthusiasm as editor, and to Muriel Hall for expert, painstaking copy-editing. Many colleagues at the University of Chicago (alongside those already named), and many of my students as well, have contributed to this book in subtler but no less real ways. A book that announces so sparkling a list of friends and benefactors runs the risk of setting its reader’s expectations far too high. Responsibility for any and all hopes dashed by what follows herein must of course rest with the author alone.

The cover jacket image, David Fraley’s “Golden Boy” – a riveting performance, and aptly illustrative of this book’s concerns by its Hellenistic allusivity and self-allusivity, by its “palimpsest” technique of competing textures and lines, and by the delicately fierce wit of its title – is a gift of the artist, graciously confirmed by his estate after his sudden and untimely death. His words, from our twenty years of conversation about art and the postmodern, have superimposed their rhythms, like the Epicurean clinamen of his canvases, across these pages. As for his works, death will not put a hand on his nightingales.
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Alongside the debt recorded in the dedication, I wish also to thank the following people for help and support of every kind: my father Jack Wray, my late grandmother Grace Scott, my Latin teacher Ruth Wells, Earnest and Mariana Atkins, Bruce Mattys, James Powell and Elizabeth Vandiver.

And the most important thing of all: Kristen, you loaned me your copy of Fordyce’s Catullus that summer and I never returned it. Good thing you married me. The next book is for you. So is everything else.