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978-1-107-02855-5 - The Poems of Catullus: An Annotated Translation

Jeannine Diddle Uzzi and Jeffrey Thomson

Excerpt

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## Introduction



## TRANSLATION AND THE CORPUS

## I Dedication

To whom do I give my witty little book,  
 newly buffed and pressed?  
 To you, Cornelius: your singular audacity  
 consigned to three sheets the history of the world –  
 pithy but damned belabored.  
 You always thought my little nothings something,  
 so take this book, whatever sort it is,  
 and, dear Muse, let it last.

When I began teaching I never imagined I would show Kevin Smith's *Clerks* in class. Don't get me wrong: I love the film, a 1994 comedy about a day in the life of two convenience store clerks in New Jersey, but it's not an obvious sell as classics, nor does its content lend itself to easy endorsement in the classroom. Nevertheless, I found myself pressing "play" in a big Roman civilization lecture and giving over to Jay and Silent Bob the ostensible *scaenae frons* (Roman stage) of my class. For this I have Amy Richlin to thank. In the introduction to her translation of Plautus' *Persa* (a play she titles *Iran Man*), Richlin claims that the films and comic books of Kevin Smith provide "a really excellent current parallel" (III) for the type of humor found in Plautus and, one might argue, Roman comedy in general. *Clerks* presents a world in which working-class youths run amuck while literally minding the shop. The perennial absence of an authority figure allows a cast of over-the-top slackers to engage in a particularly vulgar and subversive

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yet also literate and political brand of hilarity, the very brand one finds in the comic works of Plautus and Terence. While many classicists attempt to draw connections between the ancient and modern worlds, Richlin endeavors to translate the experience of being Roman, suggesting a way for modern audiences to encounter Roman comedy as the Romans might have. Watching *Clerks*, along with reading *Iran Man*, of course, we might approximate in a meaningful way what it was like to sit as a Roman in the audience of a comedy.

The desire to approximate the experience of the ancient audience for the modern is precisely what inspired this translation. Most modern translations of Catullus tend toward the literal, and even Charles Martin's translation, by many accounts the best English language translation of Catullus to date, follows Catullus' line breaks as if English-speaking readers had somehow internalized the Latin original. This approach to translation may have been good for students of Latin, but it has prevented Catullus from gaining the widespread appeal of poets like Homer, Sappho, and Vergil. Catullus' style is uncannily modern, his concerns timeless; in fact, as Martin himself notes, Catullus is probably the only classical poet to have had significant influence on modern English poetry.<sup>1</sup> In recent history, however, Catullus has been approached as a poet tied tightly to his historical context, ancient Rome of the late Republic, and useful primarily to students of Latin and classics.

Fortunately, one need not study classics to appreciate Catullus. Catullus is a poet of tragedy, a poet of wit, a poet of desire, and a poet whose voice cuts to the quick of human experience. Catullus' corpus runs its reader through the wringer of human emotion, from passion and humor to grief and loathing. The corpus is conscious of its literary and mythological roots, not to mention its own literarity; it presents language as inherently insufficient to its task and social norms as human constructions. Most of all, it recognizes the beautiful pain of

<sup>1</sup> Charles Martin, *The Poems of Catullus* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989): xxii. Martin credits Ezra Pound (1885–1972) with the “discovery” of Catullus for the modern world.

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erotic desire as an essential condition of humanity, and it celebrates the unique ability of poetry to express that desire.

Catullus' dedicatory poem, translated above, is itself an excellent introduction to the corpus. In it the speaker describes his poetry, his "little book" (*libellum*), with three adjectives: *lepidum*, *novum*, and *expolitum* (properly, *expolitum* is a perfect passive participle, a verbal adjective meaning "having been polished"). He also calls his poems "trifles" or "nothings" (*nugas*) and claims at the end of the poem not to know what sort of little book he has created. Here Catullus is being coy, and obviously so; not only does Catullus know precisely what sort of book he has written, but he deliberately contrasts his book with the laborious (*laboriosis*) history of the world written by his dedicatee, Cornelius Nepos, a well-known Roman historian and biographer.

The first adjective, *lepidum*, can simply mean "pleasant," but it can also deliver a subtext of intellectual elitism. With this single adjective Catullus calls his poems pleasant or lovely but also urbane, elegant, learned, and charming. In the first poem we translate *lepidum* as "witty." While Roman wit could be charming and elegant, it could also be penetrating, aggressive, and cutting, and there is a good deal of this sort of wit in the Catullan corpus. While *lepidum* does not generally refer to a mordant type of humor, *lepidum* can mean facetious – almost sarcastic – as well as "so-nice-as-to-be-effeminate." In English, "wit" probably casts the widest net as a reference for a learned brand of oft-satirical humor whose insightfulness can be both eloquent and trenchant.

*Novum* seems easy enough, meaning very simply "new" and giving us the root for "novel" in English, but *novum* can also mean unique, contemporary, and fresh. The Roman orator Cicero makes reference to Catullus and his peer group of "new poets" at Rome using both the Latin *poetae novi* ("the new poets") and the Greek *neoterói* (neoterics, literally "the younger ones").<sup>2</sup> The Romans, always in a love-hate relationship with

<sup>2</sup> See Cicero's *Orator* (161) and *Tusculan Disputations* (3.45). See also below, pp. 9 ff.

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the Greeks, at once esteemed the literature of Greece and questioned the masculinity of the culture that produced it, so we ought to suspect that Cicero's use of a Greek descriptor is pejorative. Considering the fact that Cicero was a conservative senator and that his descriptions are probably insults, we might therefore think of *novum* as "non-traditional" or "irreverent," perhaps even "disrespectful." In "Dedication" (1) we hold *novum* until line two, making it there the simple adverb "newly," which has a web of meaning comprising synonyms like "freshly," "recently," and "again."

Finally we reach *expolitum*, arguably the most important of the three adjectives but also the most difficult since Catullus provides a tangible ancient context for it: he explains that his book is *expolitum*, literally "polished," by the very specific means of dry pumice (*arida pumice*). This description feels more technical than we, as modern readers, might like. If Catullus' poetry is so fresh and elegant, so *novum* and *lepidum*, why is he talking about pumice, even if it was used to smooth the end of a papyrus roll or erase mistakes on the page? If we appreciate the contrast between something that is highly polished and therefore smooth, slick, maybe even shiny, and a rough stone like pumice, we might get the joke, and if we were Roman, we would also know that pumice was used as a depilatory, and we might smile at the thought of a man's poetry being compared to a soft, smooth leg. Again, being Roman, and especially in light of the fact that *lepidum* can mean something close to "effeminate," we might also notice that Catullus is having fun here with gender, and we might even wonder whether the poet's body was as carefully plucked as his poetry.

As if we haven't pushed this term far enough, we can go a bit further to read *expolitum* as a reflection of the fact that Catullus' poetry is highly constructed and painstakingly crafted. While these descriptions are not unique to Catullus, his poetry navigates four significant obstacles modern poets can fairly easily avoid. First, Catullus inherited from his predecessors a complex system of metrics and in his fairly brief corpus employed more than ten different meters. At the same time,

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Catullus wrote in an inflected language whose grammar and syntax are much more complex than those of English. Third, Catullus constructed a vocabulary unique to his corpus, even coining words like *basiationes*, which we translate as “kissings” in “Kissings of You” (7) but which literally is something equivalent to “kissifications.” Finally, Catullus followed in the tradition of Callimachus, the Hellenistic poet who prized erudition second only to concision and is famous for having said that “a big book is a big evil.”<sup>3</sup> Catullus’ use of the diminutive *libellum* (“little book”) to refer to his text in “Dedication” can certainly be read as an example of Catullus’ special brand of self-deprecation, but it is also an apt description of his corpus, which comprises relatively few poems, many of which are themselves only a few lines long. Therefore, while in “Dedication” we translate *expolitum* with *novum* in order to describe Catullus’ witty little book as “newly buffed,” in my approach to translation I take *expolitum* so far as to mean concise.

Catullus’ dedicatory poem provides not only an excellent introduction to the corpus but also an imperative for translation. Our English version of Catullus must be current and contemporary; it must be fresh, elegant, and witty, and it must appeal to a literary audience. Finally, it must be smooth, effortless, concise, and well-crafted. In his provocative essay “The Task of the Translator,”<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) compares translation to art restoration:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one

<sup>3</sup> This quote is recorded by Athenaeus, ii.72a. Catullus pays homage to Callimachus in “Kissings of You” when he refers to Cyrene and “the sacred tomb of old Battus.” Cyrene was the birthplace of the Hellenistic poet Callimachus and Battus the legendary ancestor of that poet. In “Like an Apple” (65) and “Archery” (116), Catullus calls Callimachus *Battiades*, “descended from Battus.”

<sup>4</sup> From Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Schocken Books, 1968, reprinted by Random House, 2007), translated by Harry Zohn. In the original German title of his essay, “*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*,” *Aufgabe*, translated “task” by Zohn, can also mean “abandonment” or “surrender,” leading some to read the essay as a prohibition against translation altogether. *Aufgabe*, however, weaves a fairly broad web of meaning and can be translated “duty,” “problem,” “task,” and “lesson” in addition to “giving up,” “abandonment,” and “surrender.” I prefer to think of Benjamin’s article as “The Yielding of the Translator” in order to make clear Benjamin’s assertion that the translator must yield, must give up the impulse toward literal reproduction of meaning.

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another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel (Ibid., 78).

Having spent the bulk of my career studying Roman historical relief, I find Benjamin's analogy of the fragmented vessel particularly appealing: Benjamin has a great deal to offer the translator struggling to find a coherent voice across such great divides of time, space, and culture as separate us from Catullus. "[A]s regards the meaning," Benjamin says, "the language of translation can – in fact, must – let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*" (Ibid., 79). While we do not present here a literal translation of Catullus' Latin, neither is this collection "adapted from" or "inspired by" Catullus. We have tried to capture in English the spirit and essence, the *intentio*, of each of Catullus' poems, allowing the original content, form, and language to inspire our native language, and approximating for a modern audience the experience of reading Catullus as a Roman might have. If we have failed, Benjamin has provided us an apology of sorts: "[N]o case for literalness can be based on a desire to retain the meaning. Meaning is served far better – and literature and language far worse – by the unrestrained license of bad translators" (Ibid., 78).

Ancient authors did not give titles to individual short poems. The titles we have added are neither enigmatic nor distinct from the poems themselves: they are crucial elements of the translations, sometimes taken from Latin words or lines we do not address in the body of a poem. Our titles both set the stage for the poems and complement and support the lines they introduce. Catullus' poems are presented here in their transmitted order; however, this is not necessarily the order in which the poet arranged them. The manuscript tradition of Catullus is rife with uncertainty; as Micaela Janan so elegantly notes, "Catullus is a

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poet about whom everything is difficult”.<sup>5</sup> We have therefore chosen to present the poems in the order in which they are now generally published, organized by metrics rather than by narrative or theme.

## CATULLUS IN CONTEXT

## Historical

While one need not study classics to appreciate Catullus, many readers will find historical context for the poetry helpful. Scholarly consensus is that Catullus lived probably between 84 and 54 BC. We know very little about the specifics of the poet’s life, but it is clear from his poetry that Catullus was wealthy and educated, the product of a privileged environment. Catullus was born in Verona, which was in his time part of the province of Cisalpine Gaul (Gaul On-the-Near-Side-of-the-Alps), to a family that was apparently well connected at Rome and tied somehow to Julius Caesar. At some point in his early adulthood Catullus moved to Rome, and scholars generally agree that Catullus spent time in Bithynia, a Roman province in what is now northern Turkey, where he served in some official capacity under the governor C. Memmius.<sup>6</sup>

During Catullus’ brief lifetime, Rome was a city in turmoil.<sup>7</sup> Suffice it to say here that Catullus was a toddler during the dictatorship and

<sup>5</sup> Micaela Janan, *“When the Lamp is Shattered”: Desire and Narrative in Catullus* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1994): ix. Those interested in the manuscript tradition of Catullus or the order of the poems should consult L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars* (Oxford University Press, 1991) and Marilyn Skinner, *Catullus’ Passer* (Ayer, 1992) as excellent starting points. Peter Green’s introduction to his *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition* (University of California Press, 2005) provides a brief overview of the transmission and reception of the Catullan corpus.

<sup>6</sup> Mining literary texts for biographical information about their authors is generally suspect; however, “The Whore” (10) and “Not For Profit” (28) present fairly intimate knowledge of the political situation in Bithynia under Memmius.

<sup>7</sup> Much has been written about the end of the Roman Republic and the transitional period from Republic to Empire. I like T. P. Wiseman’s slim volume *Roman Political Life* (University of Exeter Press, 1985), which includes a timeline of events from the Social War of 90 BC to the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty in 69 AD, and Ronald Syme’s tremendous tome *The Roman Revolution*, of which a revised edition of the 1951 original was offered by Oxford University Press in 2002. I also recommend HBO’s *Rome* to anyone interested in a provocative introduction to the period – classicists generally love the series. Be aware, however, that by the end of the first season Catullus

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proscriptions of Sulla, a young man during the so-called Catilinarian conspiracy and the First Triumvirate of Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar, and an adult when Julius Caesar became consul and Cicero was exiled from Rome. Just five years after Catullus' death, assuming that he indeed died in 54 BC, Caesar crossed the Rubicon into Rome, a move that resulted in years of civil war between Caesar and Pompey and, one could argue, Caesar's eventual assassination, not to mention the end of the Roman Republic. The years in which Catullus lived were bleak ones for Rome, years of transition and strife, years in which loyalties changed with the tides and uncertainty reigned. It was a troubled social and political context that birthed Catullus, and we find residue of this fact in his poetry.

## Literary

It will come as no surprise that these turbulent times appear to have engendered literary innovation. We in the modern West seem to believe that great hardship produces great art. Perhaps this is true; perhaps it was true for Catullus; perhaps with the political uncertainty of Catullus' time came a certain freedom from convention. Whatever the reason, there is good evidence that Catullus was part of a new literary coterie, a circle of poets in Rome whom Cicero called "neoteric"<sup>8</sup>. Cicero's use of the Greek here calls to mind Alexandria and the Hellenistic poets, of whom Callimachus is the most well known and most influential.

Prior to the first century BC very little lyric poetry was written in Latin.<sup>9</sup> Early Roman poetry was almost entirely epic or dramatic, although the Romans also wrote satire, and Catullus is probably reacting and responding in his corpus to all these poetic forms. Catullus also makes obvious his

would already have died; Julius Caesar was assassinated ten years *after* Catullus' death, assuming again that Catullus died in 54 BC.

<sup>8</sup> See n. 2 above.

<sup>9</sup> Lyric poetry meant something different to the Romans than it does to modern readers of English. Technically speaking, Catullus did not confine himself to lyric meters; however, Catullus is received by modern English readers as a writer of Latin lyric – poetry written often from a personal perspective, often expressing subjective thoughts and/or feelings.



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Greek literary roots via invocations of and allusions to Sappho and Callimachus. Apart from Cicero's label, Catullus' own poetry is the best extant evidence for a new poetic movement at Rome, and Catullus does offer hints that some sort of self-conscious literary innovation was, in fact, happening in first-century BC Rome. In his poetry Catullus mentions favorably a number of other poets likely to have been members of his literary circle: C. Licinius Calvus Macer, perhaps the Licinius of "Erotica" (50), the Caecilius of "Unfinished" (35), and Gaius Cinna,<sup>10</sup> the Cinna of "Cinna's Epic Reduction" (95ab).<sup>11</sup> Catullus draws clear distinctions between his poetry and the work of other authors including his dedicatee, Cornelius Nepos, in "Dedication," the poet Volusius in "Into the Fire" (36), and other "appalling" poets (Caesius, Aquinus, Suffenus) in "The Gift" (14). The distinctions Catullus makes between the works of these poets and those of his own literary circle are given depth in "Cinna's Epic Reduction," where Catullus praises the painstakingly polished literary work of Cinna, contrasting with it both the bombastic works of Hortensius (Q. Hortensius Hortalus) and Antimachus (of Colophon)<sup>12</sup> as well as the "crap" poetry (*cacata carta* in "Into the Fire") written by Volusius:

95ab Cinna's Epic Reduction<sup>13</sup>

After nine harvests, nine winters' labor,  
 Cinna has finally birthed his "Zmyrna."  
 Hortensius, meanwhile, spewed  
 half a million lines ...  
 "Zmyrna's" deep fame will outlast generations,  
 outspread the river it celebrates,  
 while Volusius' pages languish,

<sup>10</sup> Gaius Cinna may be the same Cinna as C. Helvius Cinna, tribune of 44 BC.

<sup>11</sup> The Cato of "Laughable" (56) may also fit this bill, but the case is far from clear.

<sup>12</sup> In the Hellenistic period the poet Callimachus had similarly criticized the *Lyde* of Antimachus of Colophon for being overly wordy.

<sup>13</sup> Ellipses in our translations indicate lines or fragments of lines of the Latin originals lost in transmission.

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damp wrapping for mackerel  
 in the shallows of the Po ...  
 ... the annals of my heart are small ...  
 let the horde have tumid Antimachus.

Catullus' poetry gives us a feel for his literary sensibilities and probably does illuminate the aesthetic of his literary circle. Catullus was an innovator; he was highly educated, yet he wrote (and perhaps also lived) outside the social mainstream. He probably died young, and what little he wrote was intended for an elite audience.

## POETICS

We might profitably compare Catullus and his fellow poets with Percy Bysshe Shelley's literary circle of the early nineteenth century or with the New York Beat poets, literary innovators and social deviants who represent a movement characterized by erudition and collaboration. Perhaps there is an even more provocative possibility, or, to borrow Amy Richlin's phrase, a "really excellent current parallel" for Catullus: I suggest Eminem.<sup>14</sup> Like Catullus in "Cinna's Epic Reduction," Eminem writes and raps about creating and performing within an artistic community. And like Catullus, Eminem critiques his peers in a sometimes dichotomous combination of competition and collaboration. In "Message to My Love" (11) and "Persona" (16) Catullus addresses the same two men, Furius and Aurelius. "Message to My Love" asks the pair to deliver a message to Lesbia, calling Furius and Aurelius friends or companions (*comites*), but "Persona," translated below, berates the pair for misunderstanding the relationship between poet and poetry, threatening them with

<sup>14</sup> I am not the first to imagine Eminem as a parallel for Catullus. In a *Jacket Magazine* review of Peter Green's Catullus translations, Tim Keane calls "Her Husband" (83) "invective worthy of Eminem" (*Jacket* 34, October 2007; *Jacket* is a free, online literary magazine). There is also a brief reference to Catullus and Eminem on *Bootstrap News* ([bootstrapproductions.blogspot.com](http://bootstrapproductions.blogspot.com)) for June 23, 2008. While the comparison is far from mainstream, there is fairly widespread acknowledgment of Eminem's talent as a poet, and his fans include the late Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney (Adam Bradley and Andrew Dubois, *The Anthology of Rap*, (Yale University Press, 2010): 611).