

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Catullus (84 B.C.-54 B.C.)

Fine tuning the generic issue. Our rapid movement among the literary genres of ancient Rome has taken us through samples of epic, history, satire and drama. Would it be fair to say that the emphasis, throughout that sequence, is on public expression—that is on expressing the nature of society, social relations, large historical purviews? Of course this is a simplified view, and we have already fine tuned our response and qualifications in earlier weeks, but I think our generalization holds, and especially when we put the earlier texts of our course side by side with those that constitute the lyric, which we turn to this Week. How is lyric expression different from that of these other genres?

Lyric and personal expression. One wants to respond that the lyric is an expression of personal feeling, as distinct from critical understanding. I think this distinction will survive our encounters with four lyric poets in the present section—though Ovid will be the hardest to ‘fit in’—for indeed Catullus, Horace (Week 11) and Propertius (Week 12) surely speak to some degree from the heart. The way Catullus does this is far from an emotional spilling of his guts, which he is much too witty/urbane/blasé to indulge—although in one of his most moving poems, #101, he unfolds a moving elegy to his departed brother, in which there is nothing but metrical savvy to stand between him and raw emotion.

Who was this Catullus, famed especially for the passion and occasional viciousness of his love poetry? How does he fit into the historical framework of our course?

Life and work of Catullus. Catullus was born in 84 B.C., and lived for only some thirty years. He was born and raised in Gaul, in a prosperous equestrian family—the equestrian class was the second level of the aristocracy. (His father was sufficiently prominent that he had twice hosted Julius Caesar, during Caesar’s campaigns in the West.) Catullus was sent to Rome for his young adult years, and there, as he began making waves with his red hot poetry, he was lucky enough to spend time with Cicero, Caesar, and Pompey, all of whom appear in his poems; he was, in other words, very much a part of the high stakes socio/political world of the first century B.C., although for Catullus and his own friends poetry was always far more important than politics. That Catullus was not only admired but liked in high circles follows from an episode involving Julius Caesar himself.

Catullus and Lesbia. Catullus insulted Caesar in a poem—Catullus was a master at pretty gross invective—but though Caesar was piqued, and agreed that Catullus had a bite, Caesar turned around the next day and invited Catullus to dinner. The poetry Catullus created, in this hot cultural climate he lived, was in large part amatory, and reflected his up and down passion for the woman he called Lesbia. (This woman, we think, was the sister of a notorious urban gangster, Publius Clodius Pulcher). Their relationship, to judge from Catullus’ poems, and from nothing else, was a battleground of on and off, climax, departure, despair, return to one another; the brilliant formulation Catullus gave, to this exhausting passion, has made him one of the most influential and frequently copied writers of antiquity.

Catullus and his Circle. The poetry of Catullus reflects a deep influence from fellow Roman poets like Ovid, Horace, and Virgil, who were all part of the milieu with which, even if briefly, Catullus intersected. But Catullus cast a wide net of reading and response. He is known, for instance, for a superb translation of Sappho’s (6th century Lesbos Greek lyricist) poem to the woman she loves. This translation (poem 51) is such a perfected rendition of Greek language and metric into polished Latin, that it constitutes a truly original poem of Catullus himself. Here, as at all points, Catullus is a master of form and style, openly preferring *venustas* (*beauty*) to *virtus* (which we could translate either as *manliness* or *virtue*.) Though Catullus and his group of writers were referred to by Cicero as *neoterói*, youngsters, they included among them some of the world’s most achieved lyric poets.

The small sample below is here for a reason. It is easy for us to identify with exquisitely passionate love poetry—rare though it is—but the invective, the grossness, which Catullus can blend with lust and love, is as scarce as hen's teeth in modern poetry. Check out the following and delight!

Lecherous tavern, and you its regulars,
nine pillars along from the [Twins](#)' pillars,
do you think you're the only ones with cocks,
the only ones who're allowed to trouble
young girls, and consider the rest of us goats?
Or, because a hundred or two of you sit in a row, you,
dullards, that I daren't bugger two hundred together?
Think on: I'll draw all over the front
of the tavern with your leavings.
Because my girl, who's left my arms,
whom I loved as no other girl's ever been loved,
for whom so many great battles were fought,
is there. You, all the rich and the fortunate, love her,
and, what's so shameful, it's true, all the lesser ones,
all the adulterous frequenters of by-ways:
you, above all, one of the hairy ones,
rabbit-faced offspring of Spain,
[Egnatius](#). *Whom a shadowy beard improves,*
and teeth scrubbed with Iberian piss.

Readings: *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Peter Green (Berkeley, 2005.)

Havelock, E.A., *The Lyric Genius of Catullus* (New York, 1967).

Martin, Charles, *Catullus* (New Haven, 1992).

Quinn, Kenneth, *The Catullan Revolution* (Melbourne, 1959).

Discussion questions:

Does Lesbia come across as a 'real person' or as a fiction of Catullus' imagination. Support your contention.

Does Catullus address the political turmoil of his time? Or does he sidestep it, in order to concentrate on 'pure poetry.'

How do you explain the blend of gross invective with erotic passion in Catullus' work? Do these two emotive states have a natural affiliation with one another?

Catullus devotes much of his lyric power to love and sex. Is he 'romantically' in love with Lesbia? How does his 'love' change through the body of his poems? What kind of 'love' does he feel toward his departed brother?

How do Petronius and Juvenal differ as satirists? Do they share a single opinion about the life of Rome, or are their targets totally different from each other?