

## Poems

### Catullus (84 B.C.-54 B.C.)

**Overview.** Catullus was born in 84 B.C., and lived for only some thirty years. He was raised in Gaul, into a prosperous equestrian family—the equestrian class was the second level of the aristocracy, the seedbed of the middle class. (His father was sufficiently prominent that he had twice hosted Julius Caesar, during Julius 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 distinctively new poetry, he was lucky enough to find himself in the company of two life-formative groups: Cicero, Caesar, and Pompey-- all of whom were thinking, acting and conspiring at the center of Roman political and cultural life, and who appear as live figures in Catullus’ poems; and a lively, creative, group of young poets, the *neotoroi*, the *New Poets*. Catullus was, in other words, very much a part of the high stakes socio/political world of the first century B.C. in Rome. For Catullus and his own friends, who were to form one of the world’s most brilliant poetic cliques, poetry was always far more important than politics. That Catullus was not only admired but liked in high circles is implicit in an alleged episode involving Julius Caesar himself. It gives a hint of the fraught love life that impelled Catullus, as well as of the circles of power in which Catullus moved.

**Lesbia.** On the occasion in question Catullus insulted Caesar in a poem—Catullus was a master at gross invective, and tended to be unsparing—but though Caesar was piqued, and agreed that Catullus had a nasty bite, Caesar turned around the next day and invited Catullus to dinner. (Alleged, yes, and based on hearsay from scraps of other writers, and typical of the kind of personal and incidental level of evidence on which late Republican Roman history is constructed. The poetry Catullus created, in this hot cultural climate he lived, was in large part amatory, and frequently 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 poetic formulation Catullus gave, to this exhausting passion, has made him one of the most influential and frequently copied amatory and erotic writers of antiquity. If any banner followed him into his later historical destination, as a renowned poet for the Middle Ages, it would be the first verse of poem #5, *Vivamus, mea Lesbia, at que amemus...* ‘Let us live and love, my Lesbia...’

**The Story.** The reconstruction of the order and dates of Catullus’ poems, the 113 (or so) we agree to consider his legacy, is immensely delicate, and remains a playing ground for classicists’ theory. (Here and there a poem is identified by an event reference; more often, though, we are left with a brilliant expression of emotion, which can hardly be pinned down. The emotions that dominate, in these poems—humor, scurrilous invective, bitterness, anal horseplay, lust, love—rarely leave event markers or even place markers, to track them by. (We can, though, also track cross references, into the work of other members of the *Neotoroi*, the *New Poets*, who form the Rome-based culture wave in which Catullus grows into his poetic manhood.)

**Themes.** (Note references to relevant poems cited by number in the following text).

**Love.** Catullus is too multi minded, anxious, and high strung to settle for romance, though he knows every shade of eros. In *poem 2, lecherous tavern*, he finds hair sharp edges of praise, for Lesbia, and yet he extracts them from a portrait of life at the bar, from which she emerges as a symbol of purity in the mud.

**Lust.** Poem 3, above, skirts the theme of lust, of preoccupied longing which can neither be fulfilled and satisfied, nor disposed of. Ovid’s poetry is full of the *odi et amo* (*I hate and yet I love*) paradox; the encapsulated formula for Catullus’ addiction to Lesbia.

**Buggery** (poems 5, 6) No romantic, though a lover, but at all times fascinated by the anal/genital crossroads, Catullus finds his way to gross out and desanctify love, often as a way of dumping on his enemies, his competitors, and of the painful daftness of the human condition. Love exists as its opposite, its opposite as love.

**Sadness. (poem 7).** Catullus shares with erotic-emotional psyches a susceptibility to flashes of pain; the refreshed awareness of the presence of death. The death of his brother affected him deeply with this sense of transitoriness, and at the same time his whole opus is pervaded by the fear of death, and the longing for immortality—as in the last lines of poem 1, the preface. Sadness is the deep by-product of the transitory theme in Catullus' poetry.

## Poems and Comments

### 1 Preface

*To whom do I give  
this elegant new booklet,  
polished just now with dry pumice?  
To you, Cornelius!  
Since you always thought,  
my doggerel something,  
even when you alone among Italians  
dared disentangle all time,  
in three monographs,  
scholarly by Jove  
and intense.  
So keep for yourself  
this little whatever  
of a book of some sort.*

*May it last,  
O generous goddess!,  
more than one long age.*

No bells and whistles on this literal translation,--of what is probably the first poem in Catullus' opus-- the point of which is first of all to be conversational, not to show off; above all not to adopt the stultified pomposity that still, in this early formative stage of Latin lyric, drew that lyric back into empty rhetoric. In his offhand way, however, this supremely sophisticated poet stresses polish, the dry cleansing work of the pumice, which will confer on the work of the stylus that durability aspired to in the last paragraph of the poem. In this simplest of frames, Catullus sets his even simpler praise of a guy who has had the verve to plunge into the meaning of history (the 'disintangler') as well as to see a gleam of value in (little old me) as a doggerel writer, ahem, ahem.

The freshness, intimacy, and plea for immortality are all there, Catullan signatures deposited in a flash and left to stand.

### 2 Lecherous tavern, and you its regulars,

*nine pillars along from the **Twins'** pillar  
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.*

Talk about the Catullan signature. It brims over, here. Check out the *offhand* (that tricky word again) glide into placing the small snapshot of a bar and its occupants, some cool some crumbly; the widening of lens to take in the writer's own superiority to the pack...lover of a great lady, towering above you jerks. Check out the skewering of Egnatius, whose imaginably filthy leavings could just bubble over with contrast to the Queen of the Bar, 'my girl.'

*3 At this point [my] mind is so broken down by your doing, my Lesbia,  
that it destroys itself by its own devotion,  
so that it can no longer wish you well, even if you should become the best,  
nor can it stop loving you, no matter what you should do.*

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 esponse. He is known, for instance, for a superb translation of Sappho's (6<sup>th</sup> 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 *neoteri*, youngsters, they included among their ranks some of the world's most achieved lyric poets.

#### *Catullus' Translation of Sappho*

*4. That man seems to me to be equal to a god.  
That man, if it's not sacrilege, [seems] to surpass the gods  
Who, sitting across from you, time and again  
Watches and listens to you*

*laughing sweetly, which snatches away  
all senses from poor me: for as soon as  
I saw you, Lesbia, nothing remained  
of the voice in my mouth.*

*But my tongue is stiff, a delicate flame runs  
under my limbs, my ears ring  
with their own sound, my twin eyes are covered  
with darkness.*

*Leisure, Catullus, is trouble for you:  
In leisure you become overjoyed and too passionate:  
Leisure has destroyed kings before  
And blessed cities.*

*5. Cleverest of all thieves at the baths,  
father Vibennius and you his profligate son,*

*for the father has a dirtier right-hand,  
but the son has a more voracious anus:  
off with you into banishment and the dismal regions,  
since the father's plunderings are known  
to all the world, and, son, you cannot sell  
your hairy bottom for an As. (Roman coin.; a penny.)*

**6** *Do not wonder, o Rufus, why no woman  
wants to place her dainty thigh under you,  
not if you should undermine her with a gift of rare clothes  
or with the pleasures of a transparent jewel.*

*A certain bad story hurts you, by which a wild billy-goat  
is said to dwell under the valley of your upper arms.  
All fear this; nor is it strange: for it is a very bad  
beast, nor one with which a pretty girl would lie.  
Therefore, either kill the cruel pest of the noses  
or cease to wonder why they flee.*

**7** *Elegy to the tomb of his brother*

*Carried through many nations and many seas,  
I arrive, brother, at these miserable funeral rites,  
So that I might bestow you with the final gift of death  
And might speak in vain to the silent ash.  
Since Fortune has stolen you yourself from me,  
Alas, wretched brother, unfairly stolen from me,  
Meanwhile, however, receive these which in the ancient custom of [our] parents  
were handed down as a sad gift for funeral rites,  
dripping much with fraternal weeping,  
And forever, brother, hail and farewell.*