

### **Module 3 – Section C: Handout 1**

#### **NEOTERIC POETRY AND CATULLUS**

##### **Neoteric Poetry**

- New school of poetry developed in Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.
- These poets were called *Neoterics* (< Gr. *neoterikos* = modern)
- Cicero disapproved of the type of poetry they wrote and called them *neoterói* in Greek (= ‘the young ones’) or *poetae novi* in Latin (= ‘new poets’).
- Catullus (together with his friends Cinna, Calvus and others) is one of the *neoterói* and only his poems survive.

##### **Social and Cultural Background**

- one aspect of the general ‘Hellenization’ of Roman life and culture
- revolution in literary taste accompanied by a more general change of customs
- public and political activities of a Roman citizen at the service of the state (*negotium*) replaced by free time devoted to literature, pleasure, and to the satisfaction of private, personal needs (*otium*)

##### **Main characteristics of this new poetic style**

- short poems (unlike the long traditional epic poems)
- care in the composition
- meticulous work of refinement of the lines
- personal themes (private vs. public)
- **models:** Greek poets of the Hellenistic period (Callimachus in particular, Hellenistic poet of the 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BC)

(**Hellenistic** = term used to denote the civilization, language, art and literature of the Greek world from the late 4<sup>th</sup> to the late 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.)

#### **Gaius Valerius CATULLUS (84? - 54? BC)**

##### **Life**

Uncertain dates of birth and death. We know little about his life.

- He was born in **Verona** (in the province of Cisalpine Gaul) from a wealthy equestrian family
- Catullus had a brother, who died young in Asia Minor and was buried there (see poem 101)

- We do not know when he left Verona, nor when he arrived in Rome
- 57-56 B.C.: in Bithynia in Asia Minor, on the staff of the provincial governor C. Memmius > this would suggest that Catullus was born around 84 B.C.
- The absence of any references to events later than the mid-50s seems to confirm that Catullus died young, at about the age of 30, around 54 B.C.

- **Works**

**A single collection = 116 poems.**

This collection is divided in **three sections**

- 1) poems 1-60 (*nugae*, trivia, **diversions**)
- 2) poems 61-68 (*carmina docta*, **learned poems**)
- 3) poems 69-116 (**epigrams**)

- published by Catullus during his life or by others after his death?
- probably Catullus published only part of the collection (maybe the first 60 poems?)

- **Catullus Neoteric Poet**

Catullus celebrates very **un-Roman values**: life of frivolity and excess, parties, love affairs, extravagance, and, in general, private pleasure rather than the public good.

- **Main themes**

**1) Love relationship with Lesbia**

- \* **Who was she in real life?** Debate on her identification
  - **Lesbia** interpreted as the **pseudonym for Clodia**
  - **Clodia Metelli**, one of the sisters of Publius Clodius Pulcher and wife of Quintus Caecilius Metellus.
  - Clodius, Clodia's brother, and Cicero:
    - the trial against Clodius for violating the rites of the Bona Dea
    - the trial in defense of Caelius, ex-lover of Clodia
- \* *Lesbia* = "woman from the island of Lesbos" (reference to Sappho, Greek poetess of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC who was from the island of Lesbos)  
Lesbia, like Sappho, is a woman of beauty, grace, culture, but also strong passions

**2) Friends and enemies**

**3) Mythology and learned themes in the long poems**