

Module 3 - Section C: Handout 2

CATULLUS' POEMS

- **Themes:** events of daily life, affection, friendship, hatreds, passions
- Sense of **immediacy** and **spontaneity**
- This spontaneity is only an **illusion**, sought and achieved through **learning**. Even the most casual poems have their literary antecedents.
- Poems are characterized by a solid **formal structure** and simple, polished composition; careful construction of what looks like the spontaneous expression of existential rebellion.
- Catullus' audience/readers: sophisticated and educated people

Lesbia's poems

'Lesbia's poems: 5, 7, 8, 70, 72, 75, 76, 85, 87, 107, 109

- Catullus initiated European love poetry.
- Originality of Catullus (autobiographical style)

What view of love do we find in Lesbia's poems?

- Love as the central and most important experience in life.
- Love for Lesbia is, in the eyes of Catullus, a full and deep relationship. Not just physical attraction and passion but also an emotional bond, that encompasses sincerity, trust and friendship (see especially poems # 72, 75, 76, 109)
- The relationship has the power of a matrimonial bond (i.e., themes of marriage and of fidelity/infidelity recur often)
- In his poems he defines their relationship by borrowing terms from the vocabulary of the obligations of a Roman citizens (e.g., 'pact', 'loyalty', 'alliance')
- Highly idealized love relationship
- Lesbia's repeated betrayal of their love pact produces in him disappointment (see poems # 72, 75, 76), a painful split between physical love and deep affection (see poems #72, #75) and between hate and love (see poem #85).
- When the relationship is over, the poet feels anger and bitterness and love is seen as a disease from which to be cured (# 76)

Homosexual love

- Traditional genre common in Hellenistic poetry
- It is hard to compare the Juventius-poems (# 48, 81 and 99) with the Lesbia-poems: no deep feelings and no commitment.

Friends and Enemies

- **Poems written to his friends** (poems to Veranius #9, Fabullus #13, Calvus #50)- portrayal of the kind of life Catullus and his friends were living in Rome (they went to parties, enjoyed the company of women and shared the same literary tastes). Poem #50: Catullus and Calvus share their love for poetry - Catullus is so charmed by his friend's poetic skills that he cannot wait to see him again – is this just friendship?
- Bitter and satirical verses directed **to his enemies**, usually rivals in love (poems to Egnatius #39 - to Rufus #77 – to Aemilius #97)

Style and Language.

- Language: a combination of literary language and everyday speech (sometimes vulgar language).
- Style: short, lively and expressive.

Success

- His collection received immediate success and exercised a profound influence on later poets of the Augustan period (e.g, Tibullus and Propertius)
- **Modernity of Catullus**
 - No other Latin poet appeals so directly and immediately to modern readers
 - Catullus's similarities to 20th century writers
 - Brief poems written in a clear, direct way.
 - Personal experiences and feelings are the subjects of his poems.
 - Emphasis on sexuality.
 - Catullus's individuality - the most important and innovative aspect of his poetry and of Neoteric poetry in general

Summing up: characteristics of Catullus' poetry

1. Love as center of the existence
2. Subjective element and individuality of the poet
3. Rejection of traditional poetry, high themes and tones
4. Pursuit of formal refinement and elegance
5. Rebellion against traditional Roman values and customs
6. Taste for *otium*, for a life 'apparently' remote from civic and political engagement