

**LITERATURE OF THE LATE REPUBLIC: CATULLUS and HIS POETRY**

**Lecture Notes 2**

**Notes on Poems**

**Catullus and Lesbia**

The most read and commented of his poems are the ones on his difficult love relationship with a woman called Lesbia.

**Who was Lesbia?**

- Most scholars agree that Lesbia was a **pseudonym** (i.e., fictitious name/alias) for a woman whose real name was Clodia.

In ancient times love poets used to employ such pseudonyms, selecting them so that the real name could be **substituted in place of the false one in the poem (same length, same number of syllables)** if they wanted.

- **Who was Clodia?**

She was one of the sisters of **Publius Clodius Pulcher**, member of a very illustrious patrician family. **Clodius** was a supporter of Caesar. Elected tribune of the plebs in 58, he and his gang used **violence and intimidation** to protect Caesar's interests during his absence while in Gaul.

**Clodius had three sisters.** The most famous was **Clodia Metelli**, married to Q. Caecilius Metellus, who was consul in 60 BCE and **died in 59 BCE**. Her behavior, both before and after her husband's death, was notorious throughout Rome.

- Interestingly, in 56 BCE Clodia Metelli accused a former lover, M. **Caelius Rufus**, of using money he received from her to arrange a murder and attempting to poison her after she discovered what he did. **Caelius' attorney in the trial was Cicero.** In the court speech in defense of Caelius (which was published and came down to us) Cicero attacks Clodia and depicts her as a promiscuous woman who preys on younger men. (Catullus knew Caelius Rufus, see poems 58, 69, 71 and 77 about Rufus)

Cicero had his reasons for shaming Clodius' sister, Clodia, during the trial. Clodius was Cicero's archenemy. Cicero and Clodius had different political ideas, but above all Clodius resented Cicero for testifying against him in another trial: in 62 BCE Clodius was accused of dressing up as a woman and attending the secret rites of the *Bona Dea* (the "Good Goddess" Cybele) - open only to women - in order to meet up with Caesar's wife. Cicero testified against him, but Clodius was acquitted through bribery (and Caesar divorced his wife Pompeia).

Clodius got his revenge against Cicero in 58 BCE, when, as tribune, he had Cicero banished from Rome for having put Roman citizens to death without a trial when he

put down the conspiracy lead by Catiline in 63 BCE.

Many details in Catullus' poems confirm the identification of Lesbia with Clodia Metelli. However, some scholars have challenged this identification of Lesbia, while others have suggested that Lesbia is only **a literary construct** that allows the poet to pursue certain themes typical of a love relationship. Others think that identifying Lesbia with a specific woman (e.g. Clodia) is not relevant to Catullus' poetry.

The **alias Lesbia** was carefully chosen by Catullus.

The name **Lesbia** literally means "woman from the Greek island of Lesbos"

It recalls the **most famous woman from the island of Lesbos, the Greek poetess Sappho** (ca. 620-550 BCE) who lived and wrote love poems about 500 years before Catullus. **Sappho** was renowned for her **charming, graceful and passionate love poetry** that was **addressed to women**: hence our modern term "lesbian" (from Lesbos, the island where Sappho lived).

By addressing Clodia as **Lesbia**, Catullus suggested that Clodia was a woman of beauty, grace, culture, and refinement, but also a woman of strong passions.

Poem 5 is probably the most well-known of Catullus' poems.

#### **Poem 5 'Let us live and love my Lesbia'**

- Probably one of the best-known poems of C.
- Here we meet **Lesbia officially at least by name.**
- It must be **among the first poems** written for Lesbia, when she was returning his love.
- It is an **exhortation to enjoy love and despise censure**, when they still can, before death comes ...sort of *carpe diem* = seize the day
- line 4: *suns* = days
- line 5: *our light* = life
- line 6: *sleep in the dark forever* = die

- Second half of the poem: **emphasis on numbers (and kisses) which is also in poem 7** – also addressed to Lesbia
- Lines 10-12: *until we ourselves lose track of the score,/confusing the kissing count as a sly/ method of thwarting the evil eye*  
More kisses, so many that Catullus and Lesbia will not be able to count them up and therefore will keep evil away.  
The idea of **counting the number of kisses** may refer to **some superstition that by counting them one can gain power over the kissers** – thus by making it so many that cannot be counted, Catullus protects their relationship from evil people (possibly the people (possibly the ‘elderly men with exalted morals’ mentioned in line 3)
- Very carefully structured, accurate choice of words and rhythmical effect

It is easy for modern readers to overlook **Catullus** for the very reason that he **seems so familiar**. Modern readers tend to expect poets to **speak in the first person** and to **explore intimately personal themes**.

**This was not the case in antiquity**, however, and certainly not in Rome. In this regard, Catullus' poems to and about Lesbia transcend both the traditions of Roman poetry and the Hellenistic models.

Poem 7 is a companion to poem 5

### Poem 7 ‘You ask how many kisses, Lesbia’

- It could be the **continuation of poem 5: the mathematics of poem 5 drew perhaps the question from Lesbia “Just how many kisses do you want?”** how many of Lesbia kisses would satisfy Catullus?
- **Catullus’s answer? No limit, an infinite number.**
- To express the concept of no-limit he presents **two stock poetic images of infinity** (the grains of sand of the desert and the stars in the sky): ‘how many grains...’, ‘...how many stars...’
- Line 5: Tomb of Battus, founder and 1<sup>st</sup> king of Cyrene, city in north Africa in nowadays Libya
- Line 6: reference to the oracle of Zeus /Jove Ammon in the Lybian desert, which was one of the most famous oracles in the ancient world (“equatorial Jove” because this oracle of Jove is in the hot desert)
- Again the idea of **evil people attempting to count the number of kisses** (lines 11-12 ‘some number beyond the calculation of curious people...’)

**Catullus's love relationship with Lesbia/Clodia seems to end at least according to his poems.**

**Poem 8 "Poor Catullus..."**

- said to be the first Greek or Latin lyric poem where the poet addresses himself
- it can be read in a biographical way, as reflecting the love story with Lesbia, which by now has deteriorated
- invitation to resign oneself
- gives poetic form to a struggle in the poet's mind between rejection of an impossible love (rationally what Catullus should do) and the overwhelming power of his feelings
- series of anxious, short, urgent questions, until the final verse which repeats the thematic center of the poem and at the same time closes the poem in a strong **circular composition**: "Steel yourself"

**Poem 109 "You promise, my life, that this will last forever"**

- once again (cf. poem 70 and 72), Catullus's mistress is all promises of lasting love but her promises are received by Catullus with doubts and reservations, if not with bitter irony.
- here we find a specific proposal: their love must last forever ("...that this will last forever, this happy love we share...")
- then a prayer to the gods to ask for Lesbia's promise to be sincere ("...give her the power to honor that promise, make her sincere ...") C. suspects that his mistress is incapable of a serious promise
- then, another request follows ("...permit us to keep our perpetual pact of holy friendship all our lives....")
- These are the words in Latin used by Catullus to describe their relationship: *foedus sanctae amicitiae* = *pact of holy friendship* (or *sacred affection*) – in Catullus's mind their relationship is not based on just physical attraction and passion, but it is a sacred bond of friendship and affection
- It should be noticed that C. uses –here and in other poems, see poems 72 and 75 - the terms taken from the **language of politics and civic duties to describe his love affair with Lesbia, a married woman** (i.e., the word *foedus* was used in official Roman documents to indicate a political alliance or treaty, term used to define the

relationship between Rome and its allies based on loyalty and fidelity). Here a relationship which is ethically and socially unacceptable is presented as a strong bond, as strong or stronger than the one between husband and wife and that will last forever. **Why is Catullus using these words to define his love relationship and his feelings towards Lesbia?**

#### **Poem 76 “If it brings any joy to a man to remember acts....”**

- The longest of Catullus epigrams
- Rational tone, self-centered melancholy, self-analysis, victimization
- It especially recalls poem 8
- Catullus has been loyal in keeping his pact with her, but Lesbia does not love him back, his good deeds have been wasted and he is still obsessed with her
- then in the following section of the poem Catullus tells himself to be strong and give up his preoccupation with Lesbia... and he calls on the gods for help
- he uses **images of illness/infection (love as a disease)**...Catullus asks the God to help him recover, get better, find a cure for this disease...he doesn't ask that Lesbia returns his love or is faithful to him, he simply wishes be freed from his obsession for her, that is like a disease.

#### **Poem 72 “You said in the past that Catullus..”**

- It is paired with poem 70, as it is often the case in Catullus (cf. 5, 7)
- “You said that ...you preferred my embraces to Jove's” (allusion to poem 70)
- “the love a father feels for his sons”: C. meant that his love had the same spiritual and non-physical qualities of a father's love for his children, male children and sons-in-law (as if the love for their daughters would be less and not as strong?)
- Catullus chooses this conventional image to express his feeling of affection and fidelity in the relationship, which was on the contrary essentially an adulterous relationship (see poems #76, contractual fidelity and #109)
- “now I do understand you and though my fire is hotter, I think you are fickle and cheap”: C. says that now he knows the kind of person Lesbia really is, he despises her, but he is still attracted to her.

- Contrast between *amare* (physical love/desire) and *bene velle* (affection) (see poem 75).

**The same concepts are found in Poem 75 “My mind has been brought so this by your treachery...”** poet still feel passion, still attracted to her but doesn’t like her as a person.

### **Poem 85 “I hate and I love”**

- The most famous of Catullus’s epigrams
- it represents the poet’s admission that there is a point beyond which logical analysis cannot help. Inability to understand or control his feelings. How can someone love and hate the same person? It is not something you do, it is something that happens to you and it hurts.
- That love can turn into hate is common knowledge. That one can both hate a woman and still be drawn to her is a commonplace of literature, though no poet before C. manages to present it with such an acute and deep introspective analysis and in just a few words.

### **Poems addressed to his friends**

#### **Poem 13 – “You’ll dine with me in style, Fabullus”**

- an example of a well-known **type of poem** – and **INVITATION POEM**
- generic – someone is invited to dinner, given the time and place, and promised specific entertainment
- but here the guest is to bring the dinner – the poet is poor and in exchange he will give pure affection and some perfume, which the Venuses and Cupids gave to C.’s love (Lesbia?)

#### **Poem 50 “Licinius yesterday....”**

A verse letter to one of Catullus’ friend, the orator and neoteric poet C. Licinius Calvus (also addressed in poems 14, 53, 96).

Catullus and Calvus spent the day before reciting verses, composing poems in turn, in a sort of contest of improvisation. Catullus was so charmed by his friend’s genius that he cannot wait to see him again. Catullus was unable to sleep, too impatient to talk to him

again and aroused by passion; he threatens revenge of Nemesis (goddess of vengeance) if Calvus does not respond. The poem provides an idea of how Catullus and his circle of friends spent their time and what they considered important in their lives. The language uses expressions and terms of love poems – love words used to define friendship or should we read this as a deeper feeling for his friend?

### **Poems addressed to his enemies**

#### **Poem 39 “Egnatius always smiles...”**

- In poem 37, Egnatius is caught hanging out in a drinking house where Lesbia’s lovers talk about their sexual adventures
- C. makes fun of him.
- He flashes his grin in every situation, even the least appropriate. C. says he does it to show off the whiteness of his teeth....and then the joke...the reason of their whiteness? He brushes his teeth with pee.
- Underlying ethnic slur: C. says that E. is disqualified by birth from being elegant, even a hick from Italy’s countryside is better than him, however, even if he was from Italy, C. would not stand his grin.
- But he is a Spaniard and in Spain people brush their teeth with urine!

#### **Poem 97 “I used to believe the butt and the mouth were the same...”**

Cf. poem 69 (Rufus’ armpits) – we think this Rufus is Caelius Rufus, Clodia’s lover who later she brought to trial for attempting to poison her. He seems to have been an acquaintance of Catullus. Why does Catullus attack him with such vile poems? Maybe because he took Clodia from him?

#### **Poem 49 “Of all the great grandsons of Romulus” (To Cicero)**

- The interpretation of this little poem has caused much debate – 2 interpretations
- 1) C. is flattering Cicero and thanking him for something real
- 2) he is mocking Cicero for his pompous rhetoric
- 2 ways to look at it – there is some flattery, however it does not seem sincere – but also the comparison of Catullus as worst of poets to parallel Cicero as the best of patrons might be ironical – Catullus can’t really believe he is the worst of all poets- and meant as a stab at Cicero....Catullus’ inferiority to all others poets is commensurate with Cicero’s superiority to all other attorneys..
- Could the occasion for this poem be Cicero’s speech in Caelius’s defense against

Lesbia? Catullus might be expected to welcome the ridicule heaped upon Clodia/Lesbia by Cicero.

- But would Catullus really feel grateful? Could this speech instead have presented Catullus as the fool of a worthless nymphomaniac?

### **Poem 93 “Do you like me Caesar or not?” (To Caesar)**

- It is difficult to determine the relationship of this poem with the other ones addressed to Mamurra, a commander in Caesar’s campaigns, which indirectly attack Caesar himself (29, 54 and 57).
- We do not know why here Catullus chooses to tell Caesar that he doesn’t care about him.
- It might be after, according to the historian Svetonius, Catullus apologized to Caesar for the harsh, obscene verses he had previously written; now Catullus is more frivolous, perky, but still disrespectful: he does not like him and he does not want to be liked by Caesar.

### **Poems addressed to other lovers (e.g., Juventius: poems 24, 48, 99)**

Catullus is in love with Juventius, a guy about whom we do not know anything else. The name Juventius could be a pseudonym derived from the Latin word *juvenis* = youth. Catullus’ feelings in these poems don’t seem as strong as those described in the poems addressed to Lesbia.