

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

**Lecture Notes 3**

**Some observations on Catullus's  
Poetry**

(Based on *An Interpretation of the poems of Catullus* by B. Arkins, 1999)

- Like the poets of our days, Catullus casts himself as an **outsider**, and **REJECTS the TRADITIONAL VALUES and CUSTOMS of the Roman upper class**.
- **The centrality of *otium*:**  
At the time of acute crisis for the republic the old moral and political values are crumbling, personal *otium*, the space in which to devote oneself to culture, poetry, friendship and love becomes the alternative. In Catullus' collection, the short poems in particular reveal this intimate space and private feelings most evidently.
- **Events of daily life, affections, friendships, hatreds, passions** are at the center of his poetry and they are expressed with what seems **immediacy, spontaneity**.
- **The poet gives the impression to be artless and spontaneous**; he seems to be like a child who freely expresses his feelings without the bonds of morality or the filters of culture.
- Catullus's spontaneity is the cloak that his poetry wears, it is an **appearance, sought and achieved through learning**. Even the most casual poems have their literary antecedents, in many cases in Greek Hellenistic poetry.
- We should not forget that Catullus' poems are **generally addressed to members of a refined and educated upper class who are able to appreciate these literary references**.
- **The literary references are always very well concealed under the appearance of a passionate outburst**, as if they were the unmediated reflexes of an emotion and nothing more.
- His poems are characterized by a **solid formal structure, harmonious framework, and simple refined composition, careful construction of what looks like the spontaneous expression of rebellion**.
- This **does not imply that the presence of real life and the importance of biographical experiences in his poems should be denied**.
- **Catullus initiated European love poetry**.

For the first time in Europe we have a male author writing a series of poems in autobiographical style about his passionate love for a particular woman.

“The thirty or so poems that deal with Catullus’ relationship with the woman he calls Lesbia deserve to be ranked with the greatest love poetry in the world and Catullus became the forerunner of a spectacular series of Latin poets to attempt this kind of poetry, being followed by the men Gallus, Propertius and Tibullus, and by the woman Sulpicia.” (B. Arkins, *An interpretation of the poems of Catullus*, 1999, p.18)

- For the first time in a series of poems addressed to a particular person, we can identify the development over time of the love relationship.
- Catullus’ models, the **Hellenistic poets** wrote love poems but there the experience of love is perceived more like a game, it takes place without involvement and pain.

### What view of love do we find in Catullus’ poems?

- **Love for Lesbia has become the principal experience in his life, capable of filling and giving meaning to it, the only experience able to compensate the brevity of life** (see poem 5).

- It is not only physical attraction but also emotional attachment, so a **full and satisfying relationship** that he defines by **borrowing terms from the vocabulary of public and political life**.

He says that the relationship with Lesbia was **friendship**; it functioned as a **pact**, which he always kept with **loyalty**. In poem 109 he defines the relationship as “an **eternal pact of holy friendship**”, a sanctified, sacred relationship.

- His love for Lesbia is **unique**, see poem 8: “she was loved by me as no woman will never be loved...”

**Highly idealized love relationship** which in reality probably was very different, not so perfect and romantic.

- The relationship with Lesbia becomes the **exclusive object of the poet’s moral commitment** (e.g. poems 76, 87, 109). Although it is an affair with a married woman, for Catullus it has the **power of a matrimonial bond**: the **themes of marriage and of fidelity/infidelity between husband and wife** recur often.
- Catullus’ consciousness **that he never failed to keep the pact of love with Lesbia** and the

certainty of his own blamelessness are found especially in **poem 76** ('Everything mortals can say and do for each other was said and done by you....').

- Recrimination for the **love pact violated by Lesbia** is an insistent theme in Catullus, who sees this pact as **sacred and characterized by fidelity and dedication (see poem 109)**.
- Lesbia's **repeated betrayal of this pact produces in him a painful split between physical love and affection**. Poem 72 (it "makes desire greater but lessens the affection..."), poem 75 ("...I couldn't wish you well, though perfect, or cease to love, whatever you do") Also, on the same idea of **split feelings that confuse and harm him**, see poem **n. 85** ('I hate I love...') he detests her, but he is also still physically attracted to her.

### **Poems on Homosexual Love**

Of those, poems 48, 81 and 99 tells us about the relationship between Catullus and a man, Juventius, whose affection is sought also by friends of Catullus. Catullus is not his only lover. They reflect the **traditional genre of homosexual poetry, common in Hellenistic poetry**. This kind of love doesn't seem to require any serious commitment. It is difficult to compare the Juventius-poems with the Lesbia-poems. They do **not** reach the same poetic heights; the affair appears to be of little emotional significance.

Although poems 48 and 99 deal with the same topic of kisses and use some of the same vocabulary, they are not of the same poetic quality and thematic complexity as the two kiss poems to Lesbia, 5 and 7.

### **Friends and Enemies**

Catullus fills his poems with a **wide variety of other people** who lived in Rome in the Late Republic. Catullus always seems to say what he thinks, so his friends could be extremely praised and his enemies violently attacked.

**Freedom of speech** during the republic allowed him to satirize, to lampoon even Julius Caesar.

He certainly gave us a very vivid portrayal of those who he loved and hated during his brief life.

- Author of pungent satirical verses directed to his enemies. Like the poems addressed to Egnatius (39, see also 37) and Rufus (77, see also 69). They have become lovers of Lesbia, therefore deserve his offensive, insulting verses.
- Political poems: there is a large group of poems that lampoon Caesar, his supporter Mamurra and Mamurra's mistress Ameana (see 41, 43, 93).

**Although not directly involved in politics and public life**, Catullus liked or disliked certain

political figures and with his poems he **could influence public opinion and create reactions in the political world.**

## Style

- **Catullus's language is a combination of literary language and everyday speech** and it allows the **crude expressiveness** of certain **obscenities and vulgarisms.**
- **The style is short and always lively, with a wide range of expressive means.**  
Vitality of **effective language** and intensity of the pathos
- His collection received **immediate success.** It exercised a profound influence on poets under the emperor Augustus who regarded Catullus as their literary ancestor.

**No other Roman writer appeals so directly and immediately to most modern readers.**

## THE MODERNITY OF CATULLUS

- In his book *An Interpretation of the Poems of Catullus* Brian Arkins argues that **Catullus is similar contemporary authors** in at least **four ways** and therefore can be legitimately regarded as **modern.**

**These are the four characteristics** which in his opinion make Catullus as modern writer:

- 1) C. regards **the shape of poetry** as something enormously **important**, as a valuable activity in his own right and he spends great energy not only in writing, but also in arranging his poems.
- 2) C. gives his **personal, individual reaction to people and events of his time**, a time of political and moral crisis of the Roman world.
- 3) C. places enormous **emphasis on the theme of sexuality** – as do contemporary literature and art.
- 4) C. writes in a **brief, clear, and understandable way** that appeals to the modern reader.

I think that **Catullus's individuality** (i.e., the fact that we perceive the poet as an 'I' with a very specific identity) **is the most important and innovative aspect of Catullus's poetry.**

For the first time in ancient Greek and Roman literature, the poet is reacting to the world and speaking to the reader in a direct and immediate, open way (or at least this is what we perceive).

**Involvement of the reader:** even if he is not addressing us directly, like Plautus... we **feel involved**, we feel what he feels, we **share his emotions** (not just his love, but also his anger).