

LITERATURE OF THE LATE REPUBLIC: CATULLUS and HIS POETRY

Lecture Notes 1

These notes cover the content of presentation 1 on Catullus.

NEOTERIC POETRY AND CATULLUS

- **Neoteric Poetry is a type of poetry that developed in Rome in the 1st century BCE and marked a decisive turn in the history of Latin Literature.**
- *Neoteric poets or Neoterics* are the poets who belonged to this ‘new school’ of poetry.
- The word **Neoterics** is derived from a Greek word used by Cicero to define these poets. He called them *neoterioi* in Greek (= the new ones) or *poetae novi* in Latin (= the new poets).
- Cicero used these **terms to refer critically** to these poets. He disapproved of the type of poetry they wrote and criticized them.
- The Neoterics **rejected traditional poetry** that celebrated the glory of Rome and its leaders and were instead influenced by Greek Hellenistic poetry.
- Catullus (Gaius Valerius Catullus) **was one of the Neoterics** and of all the poems written by the Neoterics **only Catullus’ poems have survived.**
- We know that the works of the Neoteric poets **influenced later poets**, especially the **Elegiac Poets**, such as Tibullus and Propertius and Ovid.

Social and Cultural Background

- The new literary taste promoted by the *poetae novi* (or *neoterics*) is **one of the consequences of the general ‘Hellenization’ of Rome**, of the transformation of life and culture that followed the conquest of the Greek East in the 2nd century BCE. We have already discussed the influence of Greek culture on the comedies of Plautus and Terence. This is another consequence of the diffusion of Greek culture in Rome and result of the admiration and appreciation of Greek literature by Roman writers, in this case young Roman poets.

- Neoteric poetry marks the culmination in Latin literature of a tendency that was already evident in Roman culture and that was characterized by:
 - a **decreasing interest in a life spent** fulfilling one's civic duties (i.e., legal, political and/or military career) as was expected from an upper class Roman citizen according to traditional Roman customs.
To use two Latin words: ***negotium* was replaced by *otium* in the life of some Romans.**
 - Otium* is leisure time devoted to the satisfaction of private, personal needs; free time spent reading literature or conversing with friends.
 - Negotium* literally means 'occupation, business', but it also refers to the public and political activities/occupations of a Roman citizen
(**nec-otium**> negotium is the negation of *otium*, the absence of *otium*, of free time = occupation)
- The Neoterics placed ***otium*** (time withdrawn from public duties and devoted to personal needs and pleasures, including reading and intelligent conversation) **at the center of their existence** and turned it into the main value in life.
- Therefore, we can say that **the literary change brought about by the New Poets was also accompanied by a more general change of customs** and it revealed **the crisis of the *mos maiorum***, or customs of the ancestors, the Roman traditional way of life that placed one's public duties before everything else.

You should keep this in mind when you read Catullus' poems. Pay attention to the themes of his poems, the occasions on which they were written, and you will see that he wrote mainly about himself, his feelings of friendship, love, hate, etc. Consider this in comparison to Cicero, for example. Cicero and Catullus are contemporary authors, but they could not be more different: they led different lives and wrote about completely different topics in opposite styles.

Main characteristics of Neoteric poetry are:

- **Short poems, very different from the long traditional poems** written up to that time to celebrate Rome and its glory, such as the *Annales* written by Ennius on the history of Rome.
- **Change in themes from public to private (private feelings, emotions, occasions)**
- **Concern for the form** of the poems and **care in the composition**, verses are very refined and polished
- Turning for **models** to the **Greek poets of the Hellenistic* period**, such as Callimachus.

*Hellenistic = term used to denote the civilization, language, art and literature of the Greek world from the late fourth to the late first century BCE. This period of the Greek history and culture is also called **Hellenistic age**, and as I said, starts conventionally in the late fourth century with the death of Alexander the Great (323 BCE) and ends with the Roman domination of the Greek east, of which the conventional terminal date is 31 BCE, the Battle of Actium (different from the word 'Hellenic').

As I mentioned before, Catullus' poems are the only surviving poems of this group of poets.

Let's introduce **CATULLUS (Gaius Valerius Catullus) 84-54 BC?**

As usual we are going to start by briefly presenting his life

Life

- **We know little about Catullus** beyond what he tells us in his poems, even the dates of his birth and death are uncertain.
- The section on Catullus' life in Mulroy's book's *Introduction* makes it very clear that **the only certain information we have is that Catullus was born in Verona, he was at the peak of his career in 55 BCE and he died some time after that at a young age.**
- He was born in **Verona** (in northern Italy, at that time Verona was **part of the province of Cisalpine Gaul**) and like most of Rome's distinguished poets, **he was not from Rome.**
- Although he frequently jokes about his poverty, it is clear that he came from a **wealthy equestrian family**, who owned a **villa at Sirmio on Lake Garda** (called Lake Benacus in Roman times). **His father was prominent and rich enough to be friends with Julius Caesar**, who visited Catullus' family often, while he was governor of that province (58-49 BCE).
- **Catullus had a brother**, who died young in Asia Minor (see poem 101 on Catullus's visit to his brother's tomb).
- His familiarity with Greek culture and literature suggests that he received the **typical education of a wealthy Roman of his days**, educated also in Greek language and literature.
- We do not know when he left Verona, or when **he arrived in Rome.**
- The only secure dates that we have are **57-56 BCE**. In **57 BCE** he was in **Bithynia in Asia Minor**, on the staff of the governor of that province, **Gaius Memmius**. He returned **from there in 56 BCE**. During this trip he visited the tomb of his brother in Asia Minor near Troy.

- All of his datable poems fall roughly between 59 and 55 BCE.
- An ancient biographer, **Saint Jerome** (*Chronicle*) places Catullus's birth in **87 BCE** and his death **30 years later** – when Catullus was 30 years old (**58 BCE**).
- But as I said, in his poems **we find references to events later than 58 BCE - until 55 BCE** - so he was still alive in 55 BCE.
- However, the absence of any references to events later than 55 BCE seems to suggest that **he died sometime after that, probably in 54 BCE**. We know that he died young at the age of 30, therefore, he was probably **born in 84 BCE** - and not in 87 BC as Jerome told, unless he lived longer than 30 years...)

Works

The *Liber* (Collection of Poems)

We have **116 poems** by Catullus.

These are preserved **in a single collection**.

Within this collection the poems can be divided into **three groups**.

- The first group (**poems 1-60**) is made up of **brief poems** for the most part **written in a variety of meters, on a variety of topics** (love poems, attacks against enemies, witty observations on contemporary customs...). Because of the **light nature of their topics** those poems are known also as *nugae* (= **diversions, trivia**).
- * The second group (**poems 61-68**) consists of **longer poems**, again in a variety of meters and of a greater stylistic effort. Those are the so-called **learned poems** (*carmina docta*) with many references to mythology
- * The third section (**poems 69-116**) consists of short poems called **epigrams**. The subject matter of these poems parallels that of poems 1-60, but they are composed in specific meter, called elegiac couplets.

(METER = in poetry it is the specific rhythmic pattern created by the arrangement of a certain number of syllables in line of poetry. In ancient Greek and Roman poetry, the rhythm/meter was determined by the length of each syllable -long or short - in a line of poetry)

The guiding principle behind the arrangement of the poems in this collection, is not clear. The poems are **not arranged in chronological order** or by theme, but they seem to be arranged according to the meter.

It is debated **whether Catullus himself arranged and published this collection** or if it was the work of an ancient editor, possibly carried out for an edition of Catullus' poems published after his death.

We know however, that **Catullus published some of his poems** – since in the first poem of the collection Catullus dedicates “his booklet” to his friend Cornelius.

But scholars do not agree on whether the booklet mentioned was the collection that we have now (which it introduces) or another collection, shorter, with fewer poems, possibly only the first section of the collection with the short poems (*nugae*).

We are going to comment in detail on Poem 1, since it reflects the literary choices of Catullus and the Neoterics.

- **Poem 1**

The first poem of the collection that has come down to us (and probably the first of whatever collection of poems he published during his life)

It is a **dedicatory poem**, a poem in which he dedicates his booklet, his collection, his *libellum* **to a friend, Cornelius Nepos**, a Roman historian and biographer, a contemporary of Catullus.

Why did Catullus choose to dedicate his poem to Nepos? Catullus says that Nepos appreciated his work ('you were inclined to think that my banter amounted to something...')

In the poem Catullus refers to one of Cornelius's works, a **history of the world in three volumes, the *Chronica*** (now lost). ('you summarized history ...in a trio of learned...and laborious volumes...')

At the same time in this poem – the first of whatever collection he published - he **establishes his artistic claims, the artistic principles of Neoteric poetry.**

Line 1 and 2:

Catullus defines his book of poems as a **booklet**, a small book, which can be seen as a reference to the fact that Neoterics wrote **short poems**

It is '**debonair**' = *elegant, refined, sophisticated*, since the Neoterics pay much attention to the form of poetry and chose each word and constructed each line carefully

It is '**new**' (**in the content and in the form**)

It is '**pumice-polished**': reference to the practice of preparing the papyrus scrolls (which were used to write on) by smoothing them with pumice stone > the booklet is new, therefore is a scroll that has just been polished with pumice stone, but it is also figuratively “polished”, refined in the form, its content = the poems are refined as it was typical of Neoteric poetry.

He also modestly **defines his poems as banter**, trivia, are about unimportant things.

And he indirectly **compares and contrasts his work with the one of his friend Cornelius** (carefully chosen by Catullus among his friend as the recipient of the dedication): Catullus' trivia vs. the history of Rome described by Nepos

Cornelius' literary work **is the opposite of Catullus'**: it belongs to the genre of the traditional long historical accounts, genre that Catullus is reacting against heavy themes of historical events vs. light themes of love and friendship. Long poems vs. short ones.

False modesty of Catullus: 'you were inclined to think that **my banter amounted to something...**' '...so here is **a bit of a booklet, whatever is worth...**'

In the line before the last Catullus addresses a 'patroness maiden', who is she? She is the Muse, goddess and patroness of poetry. It was typical for poets to ask the Muse for inspiration at the beginning of their work. Here Catullus asks her to let the booklet last at least for this one generation and not to be immediately forgotten

Catullus the Neoteric Poet

The first poem of the collection clearly presents the characteristics of this new kind of poetry. There is a change in the subject, tone, and purpose of poetry. Like the other Neoteric Poets, Catullus turned for his inspiration to **the Greek poets of 3rd/2nd-century BCE**, Greek poets who wrote in the Hellenistic period.

These Hellenistic poets were **also called 'Alexandrian poets'** because the center of the production of this type of poetry was the city of Alexandria in Egypt and they were noted for an extremely **sophisticated, learned, often artificial type of poetry.**

The main model for the Neoterics was **Callimachus**, a Greek poet of the Hellenistic period, who lived in the 3rd c. BCE in Alexandria (Egypt) and was the leading figure of the period. Callimachus introduced a new poetic style and argued that poets should attempt to write short, finely crafted pieces rather than cling to the grand genres of the past, such as epic or tragedy.

Catullus and his friends, **Cinna** and **Licinius Calvus** turned to the Hellenistic poets and Callimachus in particular for inspiration and **rejected the pompous, long traditional epic poems, outdated in the content and not refined in the form. Instead they produced short poems, very polished and very elegant in the form.** They write a very **untraditional and un-Roman form of poetry.**

Early Roman poetry celebrated **nationalistic themes**, presenting useful models of behavior and focusing on the glory of the fatherland and its leaders.

Catullus, by contrast, celebrates very **un-Roman values**: parties, love affairs, conversations with friends, and, in general, **private pleasure rather than the public good.**

Main themes of his poetry

Varied, eclectic content of the collection

1. LOVE

Love poems mainly for a woman called Lesbia (see below), but not only for her – he wrote also about other women, although not in the same tone and much fewer poems

Homosexual love: especially for a young man named Juventius (poems 21, 24, 48, 99)

2. FRIENDS

Poems dedicated to friends, some of them are poets themselves

C. stresses their common love for poetry, easy life, pleasure and excess...

3. ENEMIES

Bitterly attack to enemies: rivals in love, political enemies