

SELECTED POETRY OF CATULLUS

Introduction:

Little is known of the life of Gaius Valerius Catullus, mostly deduced from his poems. He was born to a prominent family in Verona in Northern Italy around 84 BCE. He spent his adult life at Rome, where he moved in a fast-paced society as a member of a group of young avant-garde poets (the *poetae novi*) who, in their lives as in their literary compositions, strove to attain *venustas* (= good taste, wit, suavity). He spent a year in the service of a provincial governor, one Gaius Memmius, in Bithynia, now northwest Turkey, in 57-56, where he neither enjoyed nor enriched himself. But the great event of his writing career (61 till his death around 54) was his affair with a woman he called Lesbia.

Lesbia was in all likelihood a certain Clodia, wife of a distinguished bore, Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer (consul in 60, dead in 59). An aristocrat of the bluest blood (the Claudian *gens*), she was the sister of the notorious Publius Clodius Pulcher, a politician and proto-mafioso given to achieving his goals by intimidation and violence. According to various sources, especially Cicero in his speech (56) in defense of Marcus Caelius Rufus, one of Clodia's former lovers, she was beautiful, worldly, intelligent, witty, chic, nymphomaniacal, incestuous, murderous, and generally devoid of moral scruples of any sort. She was, in short, the antithesis of the respectable Roman *matrona*.

This is the extent of the historical data. Its paucity need not, however, interfere with our appreciation of Catullus's poetry. As Frank Copley has said,

a lyric poem is itself. It tells us all we need to know about itself, or at least all the poet wants us to know about it. No lyric poem depends on any other for its worth or meaning; it is itself, a whole, an entity, a complete unity of thought. We do not need to tie it to something else in order to understand it. It is a creature--a small creature, perhaps, but nonetheless a creature.... It is read and valued for the truth it has in itself.... To the understanding of a lyric poem, the biography of its author is irrelevant.

1 (1, Sesar)

Who do I give this neat little book to
all new and polished up and ready to go?
You, Cornelius, because you always thought
there was something to this stuff of mine,
and were the one man in Italy with guts enough
to lay out all history in a couple of pages,
a learned job, by god, and it took work.
So here's the book for whatever it's worth
I want you to have it. And please, goddess,
see that it lasts for more than a lifetime

2 (5, Latin text)

Viuamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus,
rumoresque senum seueriorum
omnes unius aestimemus assis!
soles occidere et redire possunt:
nobis cum semel occidit breuis lux
nox est perpetua una dormienda.
da mi basia mille, deinde centum,
dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,
deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum.
dein, cum milia multa fecerimus,
conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus,
aut ne quis malus inuidere possit,
cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.

2a (5, Cornish)

Let us live, my Lesbia, and love, and value at one farthing all the talk of crabbed
old men.

Suns may set and rise again. For us, when the short light has once set,
remains to be slept the sleep of one unbroken night.

Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred, then another thousand, then a
second hundred, then yet another thousand, then a hundred. Then, when we
have made up many thousands, we will confuse our counting, that we may not
know the reckoning, nor any malicious person blight them with evil eye, when
he knows that our kisses are so many.

2b (5, Smith & Holoka)

Let's do some living, my Lesbia, and loving,
and not give a damn for the gossip
of all those stern old moralists;
suns can set and then rise up again,

but our brief sunburst goes out just once,
and then it's curtains and the big sleep.
Gimme a thousand kisses, then a hundred,
another thousand, another hundred,
then still another thousand and hundred,
then let's make so many thousands
that we lose track, no counting 'em at all,
so those envious fools can't jinx us
by toting up our kisses.

2c (5, Whigham)

Lesbia
 live with me
& love me so
we'll laugh at all
the sour-faced strict-
ures of the wise.
This sun once set
will rise again,
when our sun sets
follows night &
an endless sleep.
Kiss me now a
thousand times &
now a hundred
more & then a
hundred & a
thousand more again
till with so many
hundred thousand
kisses you & I
shall both lose count
nor any can
from envy of
so much a kissing
put his finger
on the number
of sweet kisses
you of me &
I of you,
darling, have had.

2d (5, Copley)

I said to her, darling, I said
let's LIVE and
let's LOVE and

what do we care what those old
purveyors of joylessness say?
(they can go to hell, all of them)
the Sun dies every night
in the morning he's there again
you and I, now,
when our briefly tiny light flickers out,
it's night for us, one single
everlasting
Night.
give me a kiss, a hundred a thousand kisses
a fifty eleven seven hundred thousand
kisses, and let's
do it all over again
 Darling
how many, how many, you say?
mix them up; it's bad luck
to know how many; wouldn't want people
to count, them, up
somebody might have the Evil Eye
and if he knew he just might
BEWITCH
them.

3 (7, Sesar)

Just how many kisses do I want, Lesbia,
before I finally get my fill of you?
Add up all of the sands across Africa
from the drug markets of Cyrenaica
to Jupiter sweating in his hot temple
on down to the tomb of old man Battus,
or all the stars in the dead of night
watching folks making love on the sly,
and that's how many kisses it'll take
before crazy Catullus stops kissing you,
more than all of the curious can count
or bad-mouth with their mumbo-jumbo.

4a (2, Smith & Holoka)

Sparrow, my girlfriend's pet,
she likes to play with you, hold you
in her lap, give you her fingertip
to provoke your eager biting;
when my girl wants to play, radiant,
I don't know what tender games,
it soothes her pain a little bit,

I think, so that her heavy fever dies down:
I wish I could play with you as she does
and unburden the cares of my sad spirit.

4b (2, Copley)

little bird, her darling
(sometimes when she plays with you
she suddenly holds you tight to her breast
or sticks out a finger--oo, you little rascal
you peck, go on do it again, harder, oo
that's when my (how I wish I were with her
she's so beautiful
feels preciously a little gay
(longing perhaps she thinks of me
and this helps me make it easier to bear
as when passion heavy flames
and then, dies, down
I'd like to play with you the way she does
and soothe within my heart the aches of love.

5a (3, Smith & Holoka)

Lament, O Cupids and Venuses,
and charming devotees of Venus,
my girlfriend's sparrow is dead,
my girlfriend's pet sparrow.
She loved him more than sight itself:
for he was her sweetie, and he knew her
as a girl knows her own mother,
nor would he move from her lap,
but leaping around now here and now there
only to his mistress would he chirp on and on.
Now he passes down that gloomy path
from which no one ever returns.
Curse you, you evil shades of Death,
who devour every beautiful thing;
you snatched a beautiful sparrow away from me.
O evil deed! O pitiful sparrow,
because of you now my girl
is crying her eyes red and swollen.

5b (3, Gregory)

DRESS now in sorrow, O all
you shades of Venus,
and your little cupids weep.
My girl has lost her darling sparrow;

he is dead, her precious toy
that she loved more than her two eyes,
O, honeyed sparrow following her
as a girl follows her mother,
never to leave her breast, but tripping
now here, now there, and always singing
he sweet falsetto
song to her alone.
Now he is gone, poor creature,
lost in darkness,
to a sad place
from which no one returns.
O ravenous hell!
My evil hatred rises against your power,
you that devour
all things beautiful;
and now this pitiful, broken sparrow,
who is the cause of my girl's grief,
making her eyes weary and red with sorrow.

6a (51, Smith & Holoka)

That man seems to me equal to a god,
he even seems, bless me, to surpass the gods,
who sits beside you
sees and hears you

laughing sweetly--that snatches
away my senses: for as soon
as I've looked at you, Lesbia, there's no voice
left in me

but my tongue turns leaden, a slender
flame pulses through my limbs, my ears ring
on their own, double night shades
my eyes.

Idleness, Catullus, is no good for you:
you revel and delight too much in idleness.
Before this idleness has wrecked kings
and kingdoms.

6b (51, Whigham)

Godlike the man who
sits at her side, who
watches and catches
that laughter

which (softly) tears me
to tatters; nothing is
left of me, each time
 I see her,
... tongue numbed; arms, legs
melting, on fire; drum
drumming in ears; head-
 lights gone black.

Coda

Her ease is your sloth, Catullus
you itch & roll in her ease:
former kings and cities
lost in the valley of her arm.

6c (Sappho)

Like the very gods in my sight is he who
sits where he can look in your eyes, who listens
close to you, to hear the soft voice, its sweetness
 murmur in love and

laughter, all for him. But it breaks my spirit;
underneath my breast all the heart is shaken.
Let me only glance where you are, the voice dies,
 I can say nothing,

but my lips are stricken to silence, under-
neath my skin the tenuous flame suffuses;
nothing shows in front of my eyes, my ears are
 muted in thunder.

And the sweat breaks running upon me, fever
shakes my body, paler I turn than grass is;
I can feel that I have been changed, I feel that
 death has come near me.

7 (83, Sesar)

Lesbia curses me out in front of her husband
and the happy fool goes delirious.
Wise up, stupid. If she got over me she'd shut up
and act normal. So her bitching and snapping means
she remembers, and she's even nastier about it
because she's burnt. When in heat she hollers.

8 (92, Sesar)

Lesbia always talks bad about me, she never
shuts up about it. I swear she loves me.
How come? It's the same with me. I curse her
with a vengeance, and I swear I love her.

9 (109, Copley)

"happy" my darling, you say, "shall be this love,
now and forever and ever between us two"
god grant her power to make this promise true
to say it in honesty and from the heart
that we may honor so long as we both shall live
his bond eternal, holy, cherished, dear

10 (87, Sesar)

No woman can ever say she was loved
as much as I loved you, my Lesbia.
And no vows were ever kept as well
as my love for you kept me to mine.

11 (70, Smith & Holoka)

My woman says there's nobody she'd rather marry
than me, not even if Jupiter himself were to ask.
She says: but whatever a woman tells an eager lover
should be written on wind and rushing water.

12 (72, Smith & Holoka)

You used to say that you knew Catullus alone,
Lesbia, and you didn't prefer even Jupiter to me.
I loved you then not as any guy loves his girl,
but as a father loves his children and sons-in-law.
But now I know you better; so though I burn more intensely,
you're so much more cheap and worthless.
How can this be you say? Because such an injury
makes the lover love more but care less.

13 (75, Smith & Holoka)

My mind's been brought down to this, Lesbia,
'cause of you, and destroys itself by its own devotion:
it's gotten so I couldn't love you at your best,
nor stop wanting you no matter what you did.

good things he's done, knowing he's been true,
that he didn't break his word, or swear by the
gods to promises that he never meant to keep,
then many joys await you for long years to come,
Catullus, from this thankless love of yours.
Because all the things a person could ever say
or do for another, were said and done by you.
All wasted, given to a heart that never cared.
So why keep on torturing yourself anymore?
Come on now, be tough, get yourself together,
the gods don't want your misery, so quit it.
It's hard suddenly after so long to forget her?
Sure it's hard, but you've got to do it somehow.
It's the only way out, you must see it through.
Do it. Never mind if you can or you can't.
O gods! If you feel pity, if you ever gave
a man aid and comfort in death's last agony,
see my misery, and if I've lived a pure life,
tear out this wasting disease from inside me,
this slow paralysis that creeps through my body,
driving all the joy of life out from my heart!
I'm not asking that she love me back any longer,
or, the impossible, that she ever know shame;
I want myself well, to be rid of this sickness.
Do this for me, O gods, in reward for my piety.

18a (85, Latin text)

Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris?
nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

18b (85, Copley)

I hate and I love
well, why do I, you probably ask
I don't know, but I know it's happening
and it hurts

18c (85, Myers & Ormsby)

I hate and love. You ask, "How can this be?"
God knows! What wretchedness! What loathsome misery!

18d (85, Sesar)

I hate her and I love her. Don't ask me why.
It's the way I feel, that's all, and it hurts.

18e (85, Michie)

I hate and love. If you ask me to explain
The contradiction,
I can't, but I can feel it, and the pain
Is crucifixion.

18f (85, Cornish)

I HATE and love. Why I do so, perhaps you ask. I
know not, but I feel it, and I am in torment.

19a (58, Myers & Ormsby)

Caelius, our Lesbia, this Lesbia, yes
That Lesbia, whom your Catullus won
And loved more than himself in his excess.
Dark alleys see her shamelessness,
Where now she gladly f---s with everyone.

19b (58, Michie)

The Lesbia, Caelius, whom in other days
Catullus loved, his great and only love,
My Lesbia, the girl I put above
My own self and my nearest, dearest ones,
Now hangs about the crossroads and alleyways
Milking the dongs of mighty Remus' sons.

19c (58, Cornish)

O, Caelius, my Lesbia, that Lesbia, Lesbia whom alone Catullus loved more than
himself and all his own, now in the cross-roads and alleys serves the filthy lusts
of the descendants of lordly-minded Remus.

20 (60, Michie)

Some lioness whelped you on a mountain rock
In Libya, or else you're Scylla's child
Whose womb's all barking dogs; for only a wild
Beast with the nature of a beast could mock
A desperate man making a last appeal
Down on his knees. Bitch heart too hard to feel!

21 (79, Michie)

Pulcer means "handsome," and why not? He's well
Named, for his sister Lesbia loves his face

Far more than me and all my kin. And yet
I give good-looking Pulcer leave to sell
Me and all mine as slaves if he can get
Three decent friends to suffer his embrace.

22 (37, Smith & Holoka)

Hump joint and all you guys who hang out there,
nine doors down from the 'Twins' Temple,
do you think you're the only ones with peckers?
Do you think you're the only ones who can
really screw 'em good and the rest of us are goats?
Or, because you jerks sit one or two hundred all lined up,
do you think I wouldn't screw you all at once?
Go ahead and think so: for I'll scribble
smut all over the front of your joint.
For my girl, who has run away from me,
loved as no other will ever be loved,
for whom I have fought great wars,
sits there. All you upstanding, high-class
types love her and, indeed, what's worse,
all you low-class, back-street lechers;
you above all the other long-haired ones,
you son of rabbit-ridden Celtiberia,
Egnatius, with your respectable thick beard
and your teeth scrubbed down with Spanish piss.

23 (11, Smith & Holoka)

Furius and Aurelius, Catullus' comrades,
even if he were to go to distant India,
where the shore is pounded by far-
resounding eastern waves,

or to the Hyrcanians or soft Arabians,
or to the Scythians, or arrow-carrying Parthians,
or to the waters colored by the
seven-tongued Nile,

or hike across the high Alps,
and visit the monuments of great Caesar,
the Gallic Rhine and the terrifying
far-flung Britons,

prepared to attempt all these things with me
and whatever the will of the gods shall bring,
take these short--but not sweet--
words to my girl:

Let her live and thrive with illicit lovers
she embraces three hundred at a time,
loving none truly, busting their balls
over and over;

don't let her count on my love as she did before;
because of her it fell like a flower
at the edge of a field, grazed
by the passing plough.

24 (50, Sisson)

Yesterday, Licinius, was an idle day:
We amused ourselves with my tablets,
giving ourselves up to being agreeable.
In turn we wrote verses in different meters,
Simply as something to go with the laughter and wine.
But I came away so alight with your wit,
Licinius, and the pleasure of these diversions,
That I was not interested in food
And sleep could not cover my eyes with quiet.
But, uncontrollably, from one side of the bed to the other,
I tossed and turned, longing to see the light
So that I could be with you and talk.
But when I was worn out with this activity
And lay on the bed hardly conscious,
I made this poem for you, agreeable friend.
You can see from that the nature of my pain.
Take care: if I beg and pray, do not spit,
There is always Nemesis, my darling,
Who may well get her own back on you.
She is a difficult goddess; beware of annoying her.

25 (16, Smith & Holoka)

F--- you, up your ass and in your mouth,
Aurelius you pansy and Furius you man-whore,
who think I'm dirty
'cause my ditties are risqué;
though it's right that the proper poet be
decent himself, his ditties don't need to be.
They only have wit and grace
when they're smutty and indecent,
and they can get folks going,
not just young kids, but woolly old boys too,
who can barely move their stiff limbs.
Do you think, because you've read about

thousands of kisses, that I'm effeminate?
F--- you, up your ass and in your mouth.

26 (36, Raphael & McLeish)

Volusius, your Annals--shit on papyrus,
But what a service they can render!
Lesbia's sworn a silly oath;
And they can help her off the hook.
It's to Venus and to Cupid:
If Catullus will come to his senses--
i.e. cease his vicious tum-titty-tumming--
She'll sacrifice the foulest of poets,
Personally anthologized,
To the god whose feet don't scan.
The muck to be burned on faggots
No less benighted than he.
Naughty girl, she fancied her wit
Would tickle that ticklish pair.
Let it pass; here's the kiss-off:
"Oh Goddess born of the blue, blue sea,
Hallowed Ida is home to Thee,
And Uria where the winds do blow,
Ancon and reedy Cnidus Thou dost know,
Amathus and Golgi and Dyrrachium
(Where the Adriatic's bread comes from);
Stamp now our debt as paid,
Mark my lady's vow as laid."
Not uncharmingly put, I trust;
One so wants to be lovely to Love.
Come on now. Into the flames with you, quick!
Yes, Volusius, your Annals--
Shit in hexameter form.

27 (95, Copley)

the "Zmyrna's" out!
Cinna has finished it
nine harvests
nine winters
since the day he began it
while Hortensius turns out
five hundred thousand verses
in a single ...
the "Zmyrna" will travel
to where Satrachus rolls
his bottomless waters

the "Zmyrna" will be read
when time is old and grey

but Volusius' "Annals" will die
at Padua where they were born
and make good wrapping
for fish-in-a-poke
the monument of my friend
is small but dear to me
no matter how much the mob
may shout for joy
at that blabber-mouth
Antimachus

28 (6, Smith & Holoka)

Flavius, if your girl weren't crude
and low class, you'd tell Catullus
and you couldn't stop talking about her.
Yes, you've got yourself some kind of hot
whore: you're embarrassed to own up,
but you're not hitting the sack alone at night.
It's no use clamming up, the bed cries out
and smells of garlands and Syrian perfume,
and whacked up pillows all over
the place, the bed quivers and shakes
creaking and creeping up and down.
It's no good clamming up about your debauchery.
Why? You wouldn't be this f---ed out of shape
if you weren't behaving so ridiculously.
So, whatever you've got, good or bad,
tell us; I want to proclaim you and
your girl to the heavens in a lovely poem.

29 (23, Myers & Ormsby)

Furius, you are destitute
Of servant, safe, or bed, or roof,
Or fire, but then your dad's a beaut
And so's his wife. Their teeth are proof
Against the hardest flint. You know
You're lucky he and that old goof,
Your mother, are so well, although
I'm not surprised. You'd digest rock,
And need fear nothing here below,
Not fires, thieving, or the shock
Of homes collapsing, or the friend
Who slips you poison. Thus you mock

Misfortune--you're the living end!
You're dry as any bone, I bet,
Or even drier; gods who send
You roasting, freezing, starving, set
You up. Why shouldn't you be well?
Like stones, you're free of spit, snot, sweat,
Their absence gives you the perfect smell.
But you're still better: take you ass,
Ten shits a year and hard as hell,
The turds like beans or rocks, en masse
You rub them yet your hands stay dry,
Your fingers spotless and first class.
My god! You've reached good fortune's peak,
Why borrow dough? Let me persuade
You not to spoil your lucky streak,
For Furius, you've got it made!

30 (31, Smith & Holoka)

Sirmio, gem of all peninsulas and islands
which Neptune carries in peaceful lakes
and on the vast sea,
what joy and happiness to come back to you.
I can hardly believe I've left Thynia and
the Bithynian fields and I'm safe here looking at you.
What could be better than coming back, travel weary,
to hearth and home with a carefree, unburdened mind
and sleeping in the bed I've longed for?
This it is that alone makes it all worthwhile.
Hello, charming Sirmio, and be happy your happy
master's back, and you waters of the Lydian lake,
laugh with all the laughter in the house.

31 (32, Smith & Holoka)

Let's make it Ipsi baby,
you tasty piece, so smooth, so fine,
how 'bout a quickie after lunch?
and if you say okay, promise
you won't lock the door on me
or sneak out into the street,
but stay right at home and get ready
for nine nonstop fuckafuckations.
Now that I mention it, what about now?
I've eaten and I'm lying here full,
popping through both tunic and cloak.

32 (43, Copley)

Hi there, sweetheart!
that nose of yours is not too small
your feet--well, hardly pretty
your eyes--well, hardly snappy
your fingers--not too long
your lips--you wiped your mouth yet?
your tongue--well, shall we say
 not the most elegant
aren't you Kicki-boy's girl--that chiseler from Formiae?
you mean to say that out in the sticks
they call you pretty?
you mean to say they've been comparing you
to Lesbia--my Lesbia?
O what a tasteless witless age!

33 (86, Raphael & McLeish)

QUINTIA VOTED TOPS.

Granted, she's a star:

Tall, blonde, good figure.
I'm not saying she hasn't her points.
They don't add up to beautiful, that's all.
Big girl, big talent, she lacks the clinching spark.
Lesbia is beautiful. The beauty of beauties.
What have the others got?

She's got it all.

34 (46, Smith & Holoka)

So now spring brings back mild, balmy days,
now the fury of the equinoctial sky
yields to the pleasing breezes of Zephyrus.
Catullus, let's leave the Phrygian fields
and the fertile lands of burning Nicaea,
and let's go to the big cities of Asia.
Now my mind yearns for the road,
now my happy feet are moving in anticipation.
So long, my dear friends,
who, having all set out together,
return home on different roads.

35 (57, Sesar)

They're beautiful together, the odd couple,
Mamurra, and Caesar his queen.
Naturally. You get two splats of shit together,
one from the city, the other from Formiae,

and you can never wash them off.
One's as sick as the other, twin diseases
in their little bed, with their little minds,
and both still f---hungry besides,
beating each other out after little girls.
They're beautiful together, the odd couple.

36 (40, Smith & Holoka)

What madness, pitiful Ravidus,
drives you headlong into my iambs?
What god offended by a botched prayer
now prepares to stir up this crazy quarrel?
Or do you want to be the talk of the town?
Is that what you want? to get a name for yourself
no matter how?
You'll be known all right, and since you've chosen
to love my girl,
you'll pay the price for a long, long time.

37 (101, Sisson)

Having come through many countries, over many seas,
I am here at last for these sad rites, my brother,
So that I may give you the gifts of death
and uselessly address your silent ashes:
Since fortune has carried you off
Alas, my brother, wrongfully taken from me,
Now take these offerings which, by ancestral custom,
Are given as a sad gift to the shades:
They are wet with your brother's tears:
And then forever, brother, hail and farewell.

Key to Translations:

- Copley = Copley, Frank O., trans. *Gaius Valerius Catullus: The Complete Poetry*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1957.
- Cornish = Cornish, Francis W., trans. *Catullus, Tibullus, and Pervigilium Veneris*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1913; rev. 1962.
- Gregory = Gregory, Horace, trans. *The Poems of Catullus*. 1956; rpt. New York: Norton, 1972.
- Michie = Michie, James, trans. *The Poems of Catullus*. 1969; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1971.
- Myers & Ormsby = Myers, Reney, and Robert J. Ormsby, trans. *Catullus: The Complete Poems for American Readers*. New York: Dutton, 1970.
- Raphael & McLeish = Raphael, Frederic, and Kenneth McLeish, trans. *The Poems of Catullus*. Boston: Godine, 1979.
- Sesar = Sesar, Carl, trans. *Selected Poems of Catullus*. New York: Mason & Lipscomb, 1974.
- Sisson = Sisson, C.H., trans. *The Poetry of Catullus*. New York: Orion, 1967.
- Smith & Holoka = Smith, Lawrence, and James P. Holoka, trans. "Selected Poems of Catullus" (unpublished manuscript).
- Whigham = Whigham, Peter, trans. *The Poems of Catullus*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1966.