44 Catullus and Sulpicia - some Latin love poetry (Feb 2020)

I can teach you a Latin limerick – one of my (few and not wholly commendable) party tricks:

In hortulo Marcus sedebat
Post cenam, et somnus urgebat,
Hoc Sextus conspexit
Sellamque devexit ;
Supinus tum Marcus iacebat.

In the garden Marcus was sitting
After dinner, and sleep was urging,
This Sextus spied
And the chair he overturned;
Then supine Marcus was lying.

Picture me, then, 55 years ago, squashed into a double-desk for a whole year with Mr Lawry, my friendly Latin teacher. The reason was that I was the *only* pupil studying for Latin A Level that year, and rather than sitting at his 'Master's' table on the wooden dais, Ken Lawry wanted the more amicable (but for me more oppressive) arrangement of sitting side-by-side together. No escape! No staring out of the window! Plus, I had to do *ALL* the work of preparation instead of it being divided between others in the class.

I wasn't much good at Latin, but I did, in fact, love it (what I could understand of it). One of the reasons my A Level Grade was *so bad* (E) was that Lawry mistakenly thought that encouraging my enthusiasms would have enormous benefits for my linguistic skills. For very nearly one *whole* year, as well as working hard on my set texts for examination, I was working on Plautus (the Roman comic dramatist), who was not on the syllabus.

Lawry said, "Look, I *know* you're interested in drama, I'd like you to translate the *whole* of Plautus's '*Menaechmi*'. It's a very funny comedy and the translation will really get your language skills going." Well, in ideal conditions, possibly…! But school in your final year is filled with so many time-consuming activities that this was just wishful thinking. I DID it – grumpily, (*had* to – my dad taught at the school! "Come on, it won't kill you!") we had no Google of course and there were no 'cribs' I could find at the library – but it was a *terrible* sweat and distraction; I knew I should be working on so much else – eg. The Examination Texts.

Catullus's poetry was one such, and I loved his poems. Some were too filthy to be considered for A Level but nobody knew that at the time (or at least I hadn't a clue), but I was drawn to his startlingly modern style of thought and verse. I'll stick the filthiest in the Appendix, where it belongs – it's actually very funny and *modern*. So, who was Catullus and what was his story? You may already know quite a bit, as he's pretty well known, but for those who don't know very much I'll fill you in on the main details.

We know only a few facts about him. Gaius Valerius Catullus so-called was born in or near Verona in 84 B.C. to a family of considerable wealth and connections - his father was a

friend of Julius Caesar. Encouraged by his elder brother, he wrote poetry as a youth, in which he was influenced by Callimachus and other Alexandrine and earlier Greek poets. His poetry was in the style of the Neoterics, who prized highly polished technical achievement in their sophisticated, urbane, witty, short poems. Just as our European modernist poets around the time of the First World War were turning their attention to unconventional verse that was less constrained by the poetics of past ages, so in the 1st century AD, poets were turning their backs on the Homeric tradition and writing verse about their own times, sometimes in startlingly new ways.

Catullus's brother died in 58, and between 57 and 56 he spent a year in government service in Bithynia (a Roman province in north-west Asia adjoining the Sea of Marmara, the Bosporus, and the Black Sea) where he visited the tomb of his brother. He had by then apparently begun and possibly already ended a tempestuous relationship with a married woman whom he names in his poems 'Lesbia' (allegedly after the Greek poet Sappho who lived on Lesbos). The poet's Lesbia has been identified with a real woman named Clodia. The Encyclopedia Britannica reports rather primly thus: *Clodia, (flourished 1st century BC), profligate Roman beauty and sister of the demagogue Publius Clodius. She was married in 63 BC to Quintus Metellus Celer and was suspected of responsibility for his death in 59 BC. She was mistress to the poet Catullus, who wrote of her as Lesbia, and was the most important influence in his life. Another of her lovers was Marcus Caelius Rufus whom Cicero defended against a charge of attempting to poison her, painting a graphic picture of Clodia as a dangerous beauty*. So – a promiscuous and dangerous beauty! Irresistible.

Catullus also apparently made fun of Julius Caesar and one of his henchmen in his poems (not a great idea!), but he apologized and was forgiven. He died at the age of only 30, in 54. We don't know much more than that, although the poems do encourage plenty of speculation as to his personality and temperament.

No.5 is justly his most famous and my favourite. Here it is (and the others that follow) in *my translations* (just to prove that I can still have a go!). I don't like the very free translations I've come across and prefer to stick as closely as possible to the clever Latin syntax. Latin is clever because it is highly compact, but also the placing of words can create beautiful, and sometimes ironic, flourishes. There are very helpful web sites you can go to if you start becoming interested (like me). Why didn't we have such help growing up? So much time was frittered away uselessly, and why, oh! why did teachers manage to make Latin so **deadly** dull…? *(Latin is a language, As dead as dead can be, It killed the Ancient Romans, And now it's killing me!)*

Here is one of my few boasts (to offset my awful 'E' grade at A Level): I came **2nd** in the **North Wales Latin Reading Competition** – held in Anglesey (that seat of deep learning) some time around November/December 1967. There were **9 Entrants** altogether and Mr Lawry drove just me (where was my fan base…?) in his Morris Oxford (?) there and back

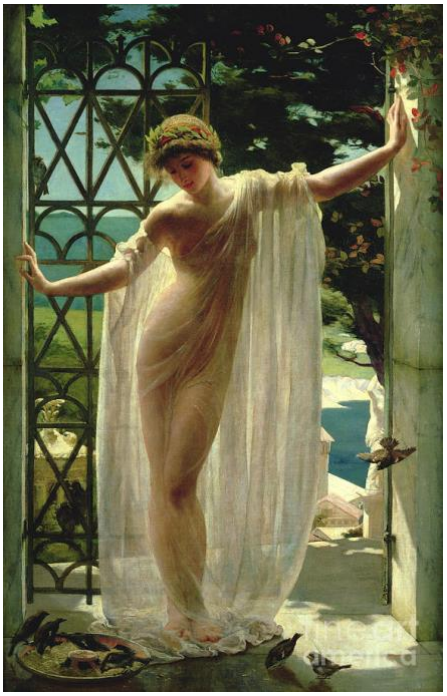
one Saturday evening, having coached me up for 2 or 3 weeks on Larin scansions and diction. No cups, no big prizes, (not *even* a Latin Certificate…!) - just the shining honour of having held an enraptured audience of about 27 elderly Latin teachers and their protégés – spellbound! (*Aherm*!?)

'Quiquid adest timeo Danaos et dona ferentes' (Here is a useful Vergil quotation you can use at almost *any* time – "What I fear is the Greeks – when they come bearing gifts". Think – Wooden Horse of Troy… eg suspicion, dark forebodings!) Lawry's enthusiastic gift to me of Plautus was just such a lurking Trojan Horse-bomb.

What is wonderful about Catullus, however, is that you really sense a man, a human being, a clear "voice" behind the artistry of his pieces. He's torn up by his passion for Clodia, who seems to care little about him. The sorry truth would seem to be that - in spite of his playful plea that they kiss so many times that envious outsiders would never be able to measure the full amount of their passion for each other – in fact Clodia probably bestowed her kisses and favours pretty freely amongst just those jealous hangers-on he's vainly trying to piss off! One senses the horrible pangs of unrequited love.

Carmina No5

Vivamus mea Lesbia, atque amemus,
rumoresque senum severiorum
omnes unius aestimemus assis!
soles occidere et redire possunt:
nobis cum semel occidit brevis 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.



Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love,
All the rumours of grumpy old men
Let us value them at just one penny's worth!
Suns can set and suns can rise:
As for us, when once that brief light sets,
Night will be a never-ending sleep.
Give me a thousand kisses, then another hundred,
Then another thousand, then a second hundred,
Then yet another thousand, then yet another hundred.
Then, when we've made up these many thousands,
We'll mix them up so we shan't know the number,
And no one can possibly be jealous
When they know there were so ***many*** *kisses!*

In the next, about Clodia's pet sparrow, we sense the poignant yearning of the poet as he 'jealously' considers his lover's plaything. The poem is light-hearted, but the emotion is very real. Why couldn't she play with *me* rather than with *you*?

Carmina No 2

Passer, deliciae meae puellae,
quicum ludere, quem in sinu tenere,
cui primum digitum dare appetenti
et acris solet incitare morsus,
cum desiderio meo nitenti
carum nescio quid lubet iocari
et solaciolum sui doloris,
credo ut tum gravis acquiescat ardor:
tecum ludere sicut ipsa possem
et tristis animi levare curas.

Tam gratum est mihi quam ferunt puellae
pernici aureolum fuisse malum,
quod zonam soluit diu ligatam.

Sparrow, the darling of my girl,
Whom she strokes and holds in her lap,
Giving her forefinger to his seeking
Provoking often sharp nips.
When it pleases my dazzling heartthrob
To play so sweetly, she finds some solace,
I believe, relieving thus the sharp pangs of love.
If only I could play with you as she is able
And lighten the sad cares of my mind!

That's as welcome to me as (they say)
The golden apple was to the swift girl,
Loosening the girdle binding her for so long.

Of course, if you remember, Paris gave the golden apple to sexy Aphrodite in exchange for which she promised him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world: Helen. Whether she also loosened her clothes for him, I don't know, but there's a bit of wishful thinking going on mixed up with the compliments to Clodia.

Back to the kisses! Poor, Catullus! I felt for him - sex-starved as I was and 17, at my all-boys' boarding school, where the local Penrhos girl-boarders were not even allowed to share the same side of the promenade along the 3-mile beach at Colwyn Bay. The boys (the superior sex!) had to keep to the seaward side of the road, whilst the girls had to keep to the less interesting townward side. This was the era of the Swinging Sixties…

Carmina No 7
Quaeris, quot mihi basiationes
tuae, Lesbia, sint satis superque.
quam magnus numerus Libyssae harenae
lasarpiciferis iacet Cyrenis
oraclum Iovis inter aestuosi
et Batti veteris sacrum sepulcrum;
aut quam sidera multa, cum tacet nox,
furtivos hominum vident amores:
tam te basia multa basiare
vesano satis et super Catullo est,
quae nec pernumerare curiosi
possint nec mala fascinare lingua.

You ask, how many of your kisses
*Will satisfy me, Lesbia, or be too **much**!*
As great a number as the sands of Libya
That lie on the silphium beds of Cyrene***
Between the Oracle of sweaty Jove
*And the sacred tomb of ancient Battus****
Or as many as the stars, when night's silence falls
Who see the furtive loves of men:
So many kisses to kiss you are enough,
And more, for love-deranged Catullus,
Which kisses neither the gossipers could count up
Nor an evil tongue bewitch.

**Silphium is a now-lost plant that was used as a contraceptive and aphrodisiac (asa foetida)*
***Cyrene – a city in the Libyan desert founded by Battus*
*** Apparently these two sacred sites are more than 300 miles apart, which adds up to a LOT of grains of sand*

Pets come and pets go! The fact that Catullus goes 'over the top', you might think, about the fate of this little bird tells us more about the depth of his passion for 'Lesbia' or Clodia. He is on the same level, really, as the bird, with whom he feels an affinity. He, too, is merely Clodia's occasional plaything. Even the bird gets closer to her and moves her more than he is able, apparently. This is the sub-text of

his extravagant (still playful) ‘elegy’ – and, of course, through the poem, he may be trying to win his way back into her heart. Same old story!

Carmina No. 3

Lugete, o Veneres Cupidinesque,
et quantum est hominum venustiorum:
passer mortuus est meae puellae,
passer, deliciae meae puellae,
quem plus illa oculis suis amabat.
nam mellitus erat suamque norat
ipsam tam bene quam puella matrem,
nec sese a gremio illius movebat,
sed circumsiliens modo huc modo illuc
ad solam dominam usque pipiabat.
qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum
illuc, unde negant redire quemquam.
at vobis male sit, malae tenebrae
Orci, quae omnia bella devoratis:
tam bellum mihi passerem abstulistis
o factum male! o miselle passer!
tua nunc opera meae puellae
flendo turgiduli rubent ocelli.

Mourn, O ye Venuses and Cupids
and however many more people with gracious minds:
The sparrow of my girl is dead —
The sparrow who was the little darling of my girl,
Who loved him more than her own eyes.
For he was honey-sweet and she had known
Him as well as a girl could know her own mother,
Nor did he move from her lap,
but hopping around, now here now there,
He chirruped constantly to his mistress alone,
He who now takes the shadowy path,
From where they deny anyone can return.
But may it go badly for you, evil shadows
of Orcus, who swallow up all things of beauty.
You have taken from me so beautiful a sparrow.
Oh evil deed! Oh wretched little sparrow!
Now through your deeds the eyes of my girl,
Swollen with her tears, are ruby-red.

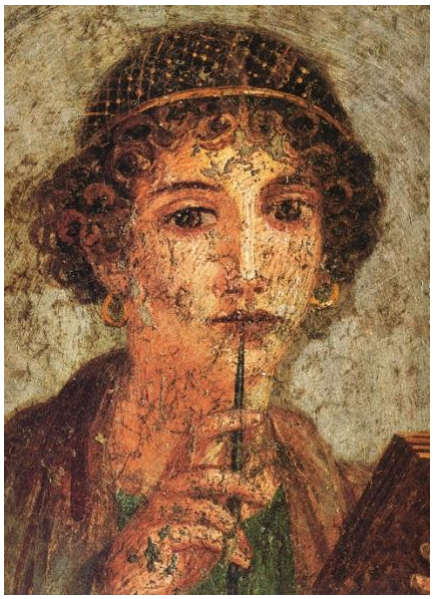
Real jealousy and envy, however, are always just around the corner, where Clodia is concerned. This next poem seems to chart the very first moments of the affair, when he spots her with another man and describes the physical effects of his *immediate* passion for her. Again, this is, if you like, classic, almost stereotypical behaviour – raunchy males in testosterone-packed Rome, where anything 'goes'. But the delicacy in which the verses and the versification chart these responses is entirely 'modern'. 'This is how it was for me!' I think this is the appeal of Catullus – the honest and thoroughly 'artistically managed' response. (Philip Larkin, though hardly in the same league of lovers, is similarly precise and caustically humorous in his analyses and carefully calibrated responses regarding love cf "Love Again", which I've popped in the Appendix!).

Carmina No. 51

Ille mi par esse deo videtur,
ille, si fas est, superare divos,
qui sedens adversus identidem te
spectat et audit
dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis
eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi
vocis in ore,
lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus
flamma demanat, sonitu suopte
tintinant aures, gemina teguntur
lumina nocte.
Otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est:
otio exsultas nimiumque gestis:
otium et reges prius et beatas
perdidit urbes.

That man seems to me to be a god,
That man, if I may say so, surpasses the gods,
He, who sitting opposite you, again and again,
Gazes at you and hears you
Sweetly laughing. Alas! For
All my senses are wrenched away, – because immediately,
Lesbia, when I see you, there remains not a trace
Of a voice within my mouth,
But my tongue is numb, subtly through my limbs
A flame steals down; with inward humming
My ears tingle; my eyes are darkened, twin
Beacons, by the night.
Idleness, Catullus, is what is harming you -
Idleness and the excesses you exult in.
Idleness has before now - of kings and of blessed
Cities - been the total ruin.

Women are exceedingly rare among the classical poets. Sapho, the Greek poet, obviously stands out, and I was unaware that there were *any* female Latin poems. Sulpicia is the interesting exception, a Latin poetic voice to be heard to be heard in her own right. Unfortunately, only 6 poems, short pieces, have survived (lucky for us that any survived).



Picture of young woman writing (from Pompeii)

Sulpicia lived in the reign of Augustus and was born around 40 BCE. She was the daughter of Servius Sulpicius Rufus and his wife Valeria; her uncle and guardian was Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus (64 BCE – 8 CE), an important patron of literature. Sulpicia's family were well-off citizens with connections to Emperor Augustus, since her uncle Messalla served as a commander for Augustus.

Sulpicia's surviving work consists of six short elegiac poems, which have been preserved as part of a collection of poetry, book 3 of the Corpus Tibullianum, initially attributed to Tibullus. The poems are addressed to Cerinthus, who was most likely a pseudonym in the style of the day (like Catullus's Lesbia). Cerinthus has sometimes been thought to refer to the Cornutus addressed by Tibullus in two of his Elegies, probably an aristocratic Caecilius Cornutus.

Forgive me if I set out the **totality** of Sulpicia's oeuvre that has come down to us – it is short enough and we should feel exceptionally privileged that we are able to read these. It would seem, first, that women's poetry may not have been prized as highly as men's, and secondly, quite odd that Messalla, a man of substance, would not feel some indignation at the frank confessions of his niece. With very little to go on for context, we should simply enjoy to the utmost what the centuries have allowed us to view – the inner workings of a very girlish romance, delivered with cool irony and humour that go beyond the stereotypes of romantic love.

I'm incapable of mastering the ambiguities of vocabulary and syntax here but I've found some excellent translations that really get hold of what's going on:
(https://sites.google.com/site/romanelegy/sulpicia)
The notes accompanying are particularly helpful.

It is No 6 which really spills the beans! The love affair, which clearly went beyond the accepted bounds for a young 'lady', is something she rejoices in (No1) but is also wary about making too much of – there is a need for discretion. Of course, we have no way of working out how fictionalised this sequence is. What is fascinating, however, is to see how freshly charted this 'love affair' is, with all the complications of the status of her uncle Messalla. I particularly love her reaction to

her birthday present - “I’m taking you off to the country as a treat!”- with her groan (so modern!) - “Oh NO!! Then I can’t get to see Cerinthus – and on my BIRTHDAY!!”

I love it and I LOVE her!

I.

Tandem venit amor, qualem texisse pudori
quam nudasse alicui sit mihi fama magis.
Exorata meis illum Cytherea Camenis
adtulit in nostrum deposuitque sinum.
Exsolvit promissa Venus: mea gaudia narret,
dicetur siquis non habuisse sua.
Non ego signatis quicquam mandare tabellis,
ne legat id nemo quam meus ante, velim,
sed peccasse iuvat, vultus conponere famae
taedet: cum digno digna fuisse ferar.

Love has come at last, such love that to hide it in shame
Will give me less honour than revealing it.
Won over by my Muse, Venus of Cythera,
Brought him, and placed him here in my arms.
Venus fulfils what she promised: let my joy be told,
Spoken by him who has no joy of his own.
I wouldn’t wish to order any of my writings sealed
So that none can read them before my lover does.
I delight in my sin: I loathe composing my looks
For public opinion: let them declare worth meets worth!

II.

Invisus natalis adest, qui rure molesto
et sine Cerintho tristis agendus erit.
Dulcius urbe quid est? an villa sit apta puellae
atque Arrentino frigidus amnis agro?
Iam nimium Messalla mei studiose, quiescas,
heu tempestivae, saeve propinque, viae!
Hic animum sensusque meos abducta relinquo,
arbitrio quamvis non sinis esse meo.

My hateful birthday's come, which must be spent in gloom
  In the boring countryside -- without Cerinthus!
What's nicer than the city? What girl would want some cabin,
  And the chilly river of Aretium's fields?
Now do stay put, Messalla; you try too hard to please me:
  Trips, my uncle, are not always welcome.
My heart and soul will stay behind, although I'm gone,
  Since you won't let me act as I would wish.

III.

Scis iter ex animo sublatum triste puellae?
  natali Romae iam licet esse suo.
Omnibus ille dies nobis natalis agatur,
  qui nec opinanti nunc tibi forte venit.

Do you know what? The sorry trip is removed from your girl's mind.
  We're going to spend my birthday now in Rome!
Now all of us can celebrate that birthday here,
  A piece of unexpected luck for you!

IV.

Gratum est, securus multum quod iam tibi de me
  permittis, subito ne male inepta cadam.
Sit tibi cura togae potior pressumque quasillo
  scortum quam Servi filia Sulpicia:
Solliciti sunt pro nobis, quibus illa dolori est,
  ne cedam ignoto, maxima causa, toro.

I'm glad you take me for granted enough to show me now
what kind of man I almost let possess me.
Go chasing after hookers and spinning-girls and whores:
forget Sulpicia, daughter of Servius.
But I have friends who care, and who will spare no pains
to see that no cheap tart humiliates me.

V.

Estne tibi, Cerinthe, tuae pia cura puellae,
quod mea nunc vexat corpora fessa calor?
A ego non aliter tristes evincere morbos
optarim, quam te si quoque velle putem.
At mihi quid prosit morbos evincere, si tu
nostra potes lento pectore ferre mala?

Do you feel loving care, Cerinthus, for your girl,
since fever now torments her wearied limbs?
Ah, I would not wish to live through this disease
unless I knew you also wished it too;
for what good would it do me to live through this disease,
if you can bear my troubles with calm heart?

VI.

Another intriguing portrait

Ne tibi sim, mea lux, aeque iam fervida cura
ac videor paucos ante fuisse dies,
si quicquam tota conmisi stulta iuventa,
cuius me fatear paenituisse magis,
hesterna quam te solum quod nocte reliqui,
ardorem cupiens dissimulare meum.

As I still hope, my light, to be your fierce desire
as much as it seemed I was a few days ago,
I've never been so foolish in my young life, I swear,
or done one thing that I've regretted more,
than going from you last night and leaving you alone,
trying to hide how desperately I love you.

APPENDIX

Apologies – this is just a literal translation, downloaded, as my Latin vocabulary doesn't extend into these interesting regions. This and many other fascinating poems just weren't available in my sadly un-misspent youth. (Did you have to pass SPECIAL EXAMS in order to be admitted to this esoteric knowledge…?)

16

Pēdīcābō ego vōs et irrumābō
Aurēlī pathice et cinaede Fūrī,
quī mē ex versiculīs meīs putāstīs
quod sunt molliculī, parum pudīcum.
Nam castum esse decet pium poētam
ipsum, versiculōs nihil necesse est
quī tum dēnique habent salem ac lepōrem
Sī sint molliculī ac parum pudīcī
et quod prūriat incitāre possint
nōn dīcō puerīs sed hīs pilōsīs
quī dūrōs nequeunt movēre lumbōs.
Vōs quod mīlia multa bāsiōrum
lēgistis male mē marem putātis?
Pēdīcābō ego vōs et irrumābō.

I will sodomize you and face-fuck you,
cocksucker Aurelius and bottom bitch Furius,
who think, from my little verses,
because they're a little soft, that I have no shame.
For it is right for the devoted poet to be chaste
himself, but it's not necessary for his verses to be so.
[Verses] which then indeed have taste and charm,
If they are delicate and have no shame,
And because they can incite an itch,
And I don't mean in boys, but in
Those hairy men who can't move their loins.
You, because [about] my many thousands of kisses
You've read, you think me less of a man?
I will sodomize you and face-fuck you.

Ha! Now, THAT'S telling them! His kisses must have done the rounds in Rome. Pity there weren't Twitter accounts then!

Here also is "Love Again" by Philip Larkin. The emotions here are similarly raw, but notice how Larking is always equally fastidious about his rhyme schemes.

Love Again

By Philip Larkin

Love again: wanking at ten past three
(Surely he's taken her home by now?),
The bedroom hot as a bakery,
The drink gone dead, without showing how
To meet tomorrow, and afterwards,
And the usual pain, like dysentery.

Someone else feeling her breasts and cunt,
Someone else drowned in that lash-wide stare,
And me supposed to be ignorant,
Or find it funny, or not to care,
Even ... but why put it into words?
Isolate rather this element

That spreads through other lives like a tree
And sways them on in a sort of sense
And say why it never worked for me.
Something to do with violence
A long way back, and wrong rewards,
And arrogant eternity.