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Review Essay:

Englising Catullus in the Twenty-First Century

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James Methven, *Precious Asses*. Bridgend: Seren, 2009. Pp. 38. Pb. £5. ISBN 9781854115324.

Christopher Pilling, *Springing from Catullus*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Flambard Press, 2009. Pp. 153. Pb. £8. ISBN 9781906601126.

Tiffany Atkinson, *Catulla et al.* Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2011. Pp. 70. Pb. £8.95. ISBN 9781852248888.

Len Krisak, *Gaius Valerius Catullus: Carmina*. Manchester: Fyfield Books, 2014. Pp. 98. Pb. £12.95. ISBN 9781847772596.

Daisy Dunn, *The Poems of Catullus: A New Translation*. London: Collins, 2016. Pp. 157. Pb. £8.99. ISBN 9780007582969.

Simon Smith, *Gaius Valerius Catullus: The Books of Catullus*. Manchester: Carcanet, 2018. Pp. 173. Pb. £12.99. ISBN 9781784105501.

Roz Kaveney, *The Poems of Gaius Valerius Catullus: Some English Versions*. Bristol: Sad Press, 2018. Pp. 154. Pb. £12. ISBN 9781912802227.

Leontia Flynn, *Slim New Book*. Belfast: The Lifeboat, 2020. Pp. 26. Pb. £6.50. ISBN 9781916222823.

Richard Whitaker and Douglas Reid Skinner, *Gaius Valerius Catullus: Selected Lyric Poems*. Cape Town: Crane River, 2020. Pp. 86. Pb. £16.50. ISBN 9780620888387.

Jane Goldman, *Catullus 64*. Edinburgh: Main Point Books, 2023. Pp. 64. Pb. £7. ISBN 9780992723385.

Isobel Williams, *Switch: The Complete Catullus*. Manchester: Carcanet, 2023. Pp. 220. Pb. £16.99. ISBN 9781800173392.

Stephen Mitchell, *Catullus: Selected Poems*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024. Pp. 168. Hb. £20. ISBN 9780300275292.

This review essay considers some but not all recently-published versions of Catullus in English.¹ Catullus has been increasingly popular with translators and adaptors into English since the late sixteenth century, a phenomenon well anthologized in Julia Haig Gaisser's *Penguin Catullus in English* (reviewed in T&L 11.1 in 2002), and the first quarter of the twenty-first century offers a rich continuing harvest. Catullus has had some appeal to every age, but his irreverence, lively use of demotic language, and interest in gender flexibility make him a particular poet for our times.

A fundamental decision for the Catullan translator is whether to take on the whole collection of Catullus as transmitted to us in the manuscript tradition, well over 100 poems, in three

main groups: short polymetric poems (1–60), longer poems in lyric, hexameter, and elegiac metres (61–8), and a final group of short epigrammatic poems in elegiacs (69–116). There is an active debate among translators as among scholars as to whether this arrangement is authorial, or that of a later editor who simply classified the poems by metre and/or length. The collection is unlikely to be a single ancient book because at c.2,300 lines it is much longer than any other multi-poem book from classical antiquity; many have suggested that the three groups each represent a book (or volumen). Most of the translators here have chosen to render Catullus' poems in the transmitted order, even when being radically selective in what they use; on the whole, they have not followed the lead of Josephine Balmer, who in *Catullus; Poems of Love and Hate* enterprisingly rearranged the poems into something of a biographical sequence, perhaps reflecting the biographical tendency in some Catullan scholarship.

Of the twelve publications examined here, six present versions of the whole corpus, while the others make selections of various kinds, usually leaving alone the longer poems conventionally numbered 61–8. This latter move has the consequence of presenting Catullus as a poet of short lyric works with limited literary learning, whereas his output varies radically between such short and simple pieces and the 408 hexameters of Poem 64, with its rich literary and mythological texture which alludes to a very wide range of Greek and Roman poetry. Removing the more complex pieces makes Catullus feel like a lyric poet of our own era, one of several ways in which he comes across as a kind of contemporary; this is explicitly noted in the Introduction supplied by the most recent of our translators, Mitchell. One version, Goldman's, moves radically in the opposite direction, rendering only the poet's longest and most intricate work.

This aspect of Catullan reception has its parallel in Catullan scholarship, where critics have discussed the two divergent aspects of the poet: on the one hand, the author of short lyrics with simple emotional impact; on the other, the more ambitious artist of deep literary learning who is not afraid to take on in Poem 64 the hexameter epyllion form which emerges from Rome's absorption of Hellenistic narrative poetry.

Another way in which Catullus seems approachable to moderns is his relative lack of metrical complexity, especially when contrasted with the lyric poetry of Horace. Some forty of the first sixty poems of the collection are in the same relatively simple metre, with the phalaecian hendecasyllable line repeated throughout the poem, while the last, epigrammatic section (69–116) is all in the same metre too: elegiac couplets, with their simple alternation of hexameter and pentameter. In the central group of long poems we have, by contrast, as well as the hexameter quasi-epic 64, the strophic lyric 61, the quasi-stanzaic hexameter marriage-poem 62, the complex galliambic metre of 63, and the longer elegiac poems 65–8. When two-thirds of the poems of the collection fall into only two simple classical metres, it permits translators to repeat and re-use their own metres without anxiety. On the other hand, the selection of poems Englished can disguise the metrical variety of Catullus as a poet.

Jane Goldman's Catullus 64 is something of an interesting outlier here, as in other respects. She renders its hexameters into lines of roughly similar length and number of stresses, but divides them into seven-line stanzas each taking up its own page, perhaps recalling the rime royal used for narrative episodes by Chaucer (her background is in English Literature). Any gesture towards the literary past, however, is undercut by her vividly contemporary language (illustrated below).

A very significant variable in these versions is their degree of proximity to the original, which ranges from close fidelity to expansion and adventurous adaptation. To illustrate this, I turn to the opening four lines of Catullus 2, the ten-line poem addressed to Lesbia's pet sparrow, which is rendered by nine of them. Here is a Latin text, followed by a plain English rendering and then the different versions:

Passer, deliciae meae puellae,
quicum ludere, quem in sinu tenere,
cui primum digitum dare appetenti
et acris solet incitare morsus

Sparrow, beloved of my girl,
Which she is used to play with, to hold in her bosom,
To give the end of her finger when you seek it
And to arouse your sharp bites
First, those versions which are relatively close to the original:
Sparrow, my beloved girl's delight;
The one she holds and plays with in her lap;
The hungry pet she gives her fingertip
(And often teases so it takes a nip)
Krisak

Sparrow, apple of my girl's eye,
Often she plays with you, holds you in her lap,
Gives you a fingertip when you want it
And urges you to take passionate bites
Whenever she wishes
Dunn

Sparrow, my girl's favourite toy –
the one she likes to play with in her lap,
that she teases with a fingertip,
making you peck even harder at it
Whitaker and Skinner
Sparrow, her pet, my darling's darling,
whom she always plays with on her lap
to whose peck peck she offers her fingernail
pushing or prodding to grip harder
Smith

Sparrow, my girlfriend's cherished little pet,
who plays with her, who perches in her lap,
and towards whose greedy beak she might outstretch
a fingertip, soliciting a bite
Flynn

Little sparrow, my girl's delight and darling,
whom she holds in her lap and sometimes offers,
bright with longing, her fingertip to peck at,
teases you and provokes to bite harder
Mitchell

The use of rhyme in Krisak's version allows him to replicate some of the tightness of the original metrics; rhyme is seen to similar effect in Pilling and Kaveney (see below), and pararhyme in Whitaker and Skinner's 'lap'/'fingertip'. One interesting issue is how to render *deliciae*, used elsewhere in Catullus as an endearment to or a description of a sexual partner (6.1, 32.2), which here casts the bird as the lover's erotic rival, as does the bird's presence in the *puella's* lap. Dunn chooses a more general English endearment, 'apple of my girl's eye', which seems a little commonplace until one realizes that it looks forward to the next poem, where the death of the same bird causes the same girl's eyes to be reddened by weeping (3.15–17). Krisak's 'delight', for its part, neatly echoes the Latin word by using one derived

from it etymologically. Whitaker and Skinner use 'toy', nicely consistent with the emphasis on play here, perhaps with an erotic trace of the modern 'toy-boy' (the bird is masculine in Latin), while 'pet' in Smith and Flynn inserts a more conventional modern colour. Flynn's elegant version also includes the word 'solicit', which looks back phonetically to *solet*. Smith's additional 'darling's darling', on the other hand, both provides a double translation and reflects with elegant concision the fact that both *deliciae* and *puellae* can refer in Catullus to the poet's love-object, while Mitchell's 'delight and darling' combines Krisak's etymological strategy and recognition of the word's erotic colour with highly effective alliteration. In their different ways, all these translators are working closely with the lexical details of the text.

Next come those versions which are freer in approach.

Sparrow, pet,
 Lesbia's playmate,
 she loves to let
 you perch in state
 between her breasts
 or in her lap –
 lovely nests
 these, where all you need's on tap –
 She teases
 with her fingertips
 as if it eases
 her pain when your nips
 are sharp and spiteful
 at her provoking –
 She's quite delightful
 And provocative and I'm not joking!
 Pilling

Oh little beak, how Mistress loves
 To play with you and guard her in her nest,
 Feed your craving with her fingertip,
 Sharpen your need, make you nip hard
 Williams

Sparrow my lover's delight,
 playing then holding on tight
 to her finger, and pecking at corn
 beak pecking her flesh like a thorn
 Kaveney

Pilling's version expands the original considerably, partly visually through breaking up Catullus' lines into shorter ones, no doubt in homage to what was once the most celebrated of sparrow poems: John Skelton's *The Book of Philip Sparrow*, the first unquestionably Catullan-influenced work in English. His rendering of *deliciae* as 'playmate' brings out its originally erotic Latin colour in modern terms (as OED sense 2 attests), and his addition of the girl's breasts to her lap as locations for her playing with the bird reflects that the Latin *sinus* can in fact refer to both; it also adds to the erotic colour from a stereotypical male perspective, as well as providing a suggestion of mammary nurture in 'tap'. 'Nests' and 'perch' emphasize the bird's avian nature as opposed to its anthropomorphism, while the opposite is true of the very human and witty 'in state'. In Williams' version, on the other hand, the nest moves neatly from belonging to the bird to belonging to the girl, the owner of the lap, which the bird now occupies as a defensive place (presumably against the poet-lover, so

emphasizing again its role as an erotic rival), while the bird itself is addressed as 'little beak', metonymically pointing to its key feature in these lines. 'Sharpen' clearly picks up *acris* ('sharp') in the original. Kaveney's rhyming couplet version adds a natural motivation for the pecking and the image of the thorn in the flesh, anticipating the girl's anxiety at the end of the poem. Once again, all these versions actively and creatively engage with Catullus' language and imagery.

As is noted in my overview of a longer era of Catullan translation from 1750 onwards in *The Cambridge Companion to Catullus*, 2021, it was only in the socially liberalized second half of the twentieth century that modern responses to Catullus were able to handle freely his obscene and satirical wit, a movement that has continued in the first quarter of the twenty-first. The two versions now under review which do this most effectively are in my view those of Methven and Williams. Both write lively versions of the opening of Catullus 16, where the poet notoriously threatens anal and oral penetration to his friends Aurelius and Furius if, as a result of reading his more sentimental love poems, they think he is effeminate:

Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo,
Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi,
qui me ex versiculis meis putastis,
quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum.

Here is Methven, who titles Poem 16 'Thank God I'm normal':

I'll shaft you arse and throat,
Alan and Kris, pathetic passives both,
What, you think 'coz I translate Catullus thus
That I'm a perv? Oh! Come on, puh-lease.

Here Methven reasserts Catullus' original point, that his sentimental poems to Lesbia do not indicate he is not a robust Roman male, and that his tender-hearted poems should not be read as straight autobiography, something which also holds for Methven's poet/lover character.

Here is the version by Williams (entitled 'Sweet'):

Beware the mighty sodomite face-bandit.
You two batty-boys dishing out lit crit
Insist my kissy-fit verse is Hello Kitty.

Here the invective is superbly contemporized: 'face-bandit' is a coined back-formation from 'arse-bandit', 'kissy-fit' from 'hissy-fit', while 'batty-boys' picks up a derogatory term from Jamaican reggae and 'Hello Kitty' refers to the post-1974 'cute' cat-based Japanese merchandise targeted, it seems, at teenage and pre-teenage girls. This is brilliantly juxtaposed with the phonetically close 'kissy-fit', which makes an important literary point, since Catullus 16 goes on to indicate that the sentimental poems at issue here are the kiss-poems to Lesbia (5 and 7) and Juventius (48).

Williams also turns Catullus' attack on Vibennius, father and son, respectively thief and sex-worker at the city baths (Poem 33), into a hilarious anonymous letter to a modern high-end sports club official:

Dear Membership Secretary
Time to deal with that changing-room arch-pilferer
Vibennius and his batty-boy brat –
Paternal paws are sticky,

Son's sphincter isn't picky.
 Why not cancel their family membership?
 Let them try that five-star dump next door.
 After all, dad's pillaging's well known
 And the lad can't sell his hairy bottom here
 Even at trade prices
 Any more.

In the same vein, Methven provides a loose version of Catullus 26, under the title 'So What?', a poem about a friend's exposure to the winds of mortgage debt for his country villa. This combines the theme of the original (updated to cover a multimillion-pound London mortgage of the then Prime Minister Tony Blair) with satire about the costly hair-care of his wife (the senior barrister Cherie Booth) during the 2005 election campaign. For a topical attack on the politically powerful, compare Catullus' freewheeling assault on Pompey and Caesar in Poem 29; Methven's poem is spiced with typically Catullan obscenity too:

Cherie dear, your cute bob is lovely,
 Mind, at that price it should be,
 Tho' I must say it leaves your neck
 Looking a little draughty.

...

The other thing you prob'ly don't want to hear,
 Sweet Cherie, is that when your hubby
 Talks of 'homeland security', he's not referring
 To your quim-stretching mortgage.

Leontia Flynn also presents some witty and colourful versions of Catullan invective, for example of Catullus 12, which attacks a friend (Asinius) for napkin-theft:

Your left hand, A—, you awful fucking culchie,
 while we're at dinner, gets Up To No Good
 thieving the napkins of the unsuspecting.
 You think that's funny, moron?

Here the Anglo-Irish 'culchie', referring to a country bumpkin from a more sophisticated urban perspective, not only provides an excellent rendering of the original characterization of Asinius as a backwoodsman from provincial Italy (Marrucine Asini) but also economically locates the scene in contemporary Ireland.

Obscenity and wit make their way in a different mode into the remarkable rendering of Catullus 64 by Jane Goldman. Here is Catullus 64.1–7 with her version:

Peliaco quondam prognatae vertice pinus
 dicuntur liquidas Neptuni nasse per undas
 Phasidos ad fluctus et fines Aeetaeos,
 cum lecti iuvenes, Argiuae robora pubis,
 auratam optantes Colchis avertere pellem
 ausi sunt vada salsa cita decurrere puppi,
 caerula verrentes abiegnis aequora palmis.

1. cockhead's legendary spaffed-out pines
2. seemingly swam through cunt-wet waters
3. to gold-stream waves and eagle shores
4. when a creamy young star-hard crew
5. set on filching the black sea god pelt

6. risked speed boating their salty way
7. slick blades fanning blue waters.

The apparently gratuitous references to male and female sexual organs in lines 1–2, guaranteed to gain the initial attention of an audience, can be seen as drawing on the underlying erotic imagery of the whole opening: this emerges more explicitly in Catullus' lines 11–12, which arguably present the phallic ship penetrating the virgin sea-goddess Amphitrite, as modern critics have noted. There is an impressively close attention to the sound and lexis of the original: 'cockhead' picks up *vervex* *pinus* via a straight translation of the first word and a phonetic understanding of the second as 'penis', 'legendary' echoes *quondam* and 'seemingly' *dicuntur*, both similarly referring to distant mythological/literary tradition, while 'swam' exactly renders the anthropomorphic metaphor of *nasce*.

Furthermore, 'eagle shores' picks up *finis Aetæos*, a reference to the shores of Medea's father Aetes in Colchis, pointing to the well-known derivation of Aetes' name from the Greek *aetos*, 'eagle'. Goldman's in-your-face performance-poetry approach meets a real proximity to the Latin text, a fascinating and effective combination.

Six of the twelve versions considered here are by women. The emergence of women translators of Latin poetry is a welcome feature of our century, which has seen their first complete verse translations of Vergil's *Æneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (by Sarah Ruden for Vergil in 2006 and Stephanie McCarter for Ovid in 2022). In the case of Catullus, gender and gender-flexibility in his twenty-first-century reception responds not only to a key cultural theme of our times but also to a major strand in his love-poetry addressed to Lesbia. There the male poet-lover appears in the 'female' subordinate role (in Roman terms) under the domination of his beloved; this would turn into the 'slavery of love' in the next, elegiac generation of Roman love-poetry (Tibullus, Propertius). This is most memorably expressed in Poem 11, where the poet pictures himself as a girl-like flower on the edge of a meadow cut down by the phallic plough of Lesbia's misbehaviour.

Another kind of gender reversal is found in Tiffany Atkinson's I, Catulla, where the poet/lover himself becomes a modern female 'Catulla' in loose and entertaining versions of a number of Catullus' poems. 'Basia mille' addresses a male beloved, Rufus, in place of Lesbia in a version of Poem 5 ('*Vivamus, mea Lesbia*')

Then live with me, Rufus,
We'll have four fine rooms
And an excellent kitchen.

Atkinson's Catulla also shows an interest in Clodia, the likely real-life counterpart of Catullus' Lesbia: the poem 'Clodia' presents an updated version of the love-triangle of Catullus 51, written in a stanza which echoes Catullus' original Sapphic stanza in its lineation (three longer lines capped by a shorter one). The poem presents Clodia as the spouse complicating the lovers' lives, but also views her with admiration as a highly capable fellow-female who smokes the same cigarettes. As in the original, Clodia's husband is unnamed, though here it is he who is the object of Catulla's passion. This is an effective feminist reinterpretation of the male/male/female triangle of Catullus as female/female/male, in which the two women predominate, and the man is merely the bone of contention. Atkinson's inventive modulations of Catullan roles are not limited to the human; Lesbia's sparrow becomes a canine in her versions of Catullus 2, 'Rufus' Dog', and 3, 'RIP Rufus' Dog'.

Catullus remains one of the most popular poets for translators and adaptors into English, less respectable but more approachable, and more evidently modern, than Vergil or Horace. His poetry of passion and invective appeals now as in previous periods to fundamental human emotions and modes of interaction, while his colourful and demotic language and his

take on sexuality and gender mean that he seems especially to speak to a twenty-first-century audience. The versions examined here, twelve published in fifteen years, show that we are living in an era of Catullan literary reception in English which is productive indeed.

Notes

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1 Peter Green's significant *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition*, 2005, and Josephine Balmer's fine *Catullus: Poems of Love and Hate*, 2004, were reviewed together in *T&L* 16.1 (2007). Maureen Almond's *Swinging Catullx* (Iffley Press, 2023), which I advised on and helped to prepare for publication, presents lively gender-fluid versions of some Catullan poems.

2 'Bright with longing' is an interpellation, or anticipation, from line 5, 'cum desiderio meo nitenti'.