

## CATULLUS

### Selections

Translated by John Porter, University of Saskatchewan, 1995.

*Catullus (fl. 57 BCE) represents a social as well as a literary phenomenon, providing us with a glimpse of the life and concerns of a wealthy and talented member of the equestrian class in the midst of the turmoil of the Late Republic. In this sense Catullus's poetry serves as a useful corrective to the gloomy picture conveyed by the violent and chaotic politics of this period: it is clear that, despite the uncertainties of the times, for many people life went along its usual course.*

*A word of warning: Some of Catullus' poems are "earthy" in the extreme. If you are easily offended by obscene or politically incorrect poetry, you might want to skip this selection.*

#### Poem 29

Who can see this? Who can endure it,  
except for the depraved, the gluttonous, the gamblers—  
Mamurra<sup>1</sup> holding in his possession all the sleek wealth that  
Gallia Comata<sup>2</sup>  
used to have, and that of farthest Britain?  
Pathic Romulus, will you see this and endure it?  
And now will that fellow do the rounds of all  
the bedrooms, proud and prodigal,  
like a white little dove or an Adonis?  
Pathic Romulus, will you see this and endure it?  
You're depraved, a glutton, and a gambler.  
Was it for this, o sole commander,  
that you busied yourself on the farthest island of the setting  
sun,  
that this fucked-out prick of yours might  
devour twenty or thirty million sesterces?  
What is misguided generosity but this?  
Had he plowed through too few fortunes? Not gobbled down  
enough?  
First he demolished his paternal wealth,  
then the Pontic plunder;<sup>3</sup> third came that from  
Spain—all the riches gold-bearing Tagus knew,<sup>4</sup>  
and now there's fear for Gaul and Britain.  
Why, dammit, do you cherish this fellow so? What skill's he  
got,  
other than wolfing down rich patrimonies?  
Was it for this, o most pious men of Rome,

father and son-in-law, that you wrought havoc on the world?

#### Poem 93

I have no real desire, Caesar, to wish to seek your favor,  
or to know whether you are white or black.<sup>5</sup>

#### Poem 10

My friend Varus had taken me from the forum  
(I had nothing going on) to visit his latest love—  
a little tart, so she struck me at first sight,  
not at all without charm and wit.  
When we got there we fell into conversation  
on a variety of topics, among which was the question of  
what Bithynia was like these days, how things were going  
there,  
and whether it had proved at all beneficial to my purse.<sup>6</sup>  
I told them the truth—that there was nothing there, either for  
the locals  
or for the praetors or for the praetor's cohort  
that would cause anyone to carry a sleeker head—  
especially for those who had an irrumator<sup>7</sup> for a praetor,  
one who didn't give a straw for his cohort.  
“But at the very least,” they said, “you must certainly  
have acquired what they say is the native custom,  
some slaves to bear your litter?” I (thinking I would increase  
my standing in the girl's eyes)  
replied, “Things weren't so bad for me that,  
just because I'd landed a lousy province,  
I wasn't able to acquire eight good strong men.”  
(Yet in fact I had no one, neither here nor there,  
who might carry on his neck the  
fractured foot of my ancient little cot.)  
At this point she said—as you'd expect from a little tramp—  
“Please, my dear Catullus: lend them to me  
just for a short while. I want to be carried to Serapis' temple<sup>8</sup>  
in style.” “Hold on!” I said to her.  
“That which I said I had a moment ago—  
What was I thinking? My friend,  
Gaius Cinna,<sup>9</sup> he acquired them.  
But, really, whether they're his or mine, what's that to me?  
I have the use of them, just as if I bought them.

<sup>1</sup> A Roman eques who served under both Pompey and Caesar and was one of Caesar's chief administrators in Gaul.

<sup>2</sup> I.e. Transalpine Gaul.

<sup>3</sup> The spoils from Pompey's defeat of Mithridates (63 BCE).

<sup>4</sup> From Caesar's campaign as propraetor in Spain in 61 BCE.

<sup>5</sup> A colloquial way of indicating complete ignorance and indifference about somebody.

<sup>6</sup> Catullus evidently has just returned from Bithynia, where he served on the staff of the propraetor C. Memmius in 57-56 BCE.

<sup>7</sup> An irrumator is someone who practices the activity described below in poem 28, lines 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> An Egyptian divinity popular with women.

<sup>9</sup> C. Helvius Cinna, tribune in 44 BCE and another of the neoteric poets.

But you, with your wicked wit, are a downright plague,  
who allow no one the slightest latitude of speech.”

### Poem 28

Piso’s companions,<sup>10</sup> empty-handed cohort,  
rigged out with your tiny packs, emptied of unessentials—  
Veranius, my friend, and you, Fabullus,  
how are things going? Have you enjoyed enough  
chilly starvation with that good-for-nothing?  
Any profit to record—as lost?  
My case is much the same: having followed my  
praetor, I now set down my very expenses as gain.  
O Memmius, you held me flat and at your leisure jammed  
that log of yours down my throat good and long.  
But, as far as I can see, your luck was much the same—  
stuffed by no less formidable a prick.  
Oh yes! “Seek out noble friends”!  
But you two<sup>11</sup> may the gods and goddesses grant  
many evils, you sources of shame to Romulus and Remus.

### Poem 47

Porcius and little Socrates, Piso’s two  
left hand men, blight and bane of the earth—  
have that Priapus<sup>12</sup> and his hard-on placed you ahead in favor  
to my little Veranius and Fabullus?  
Do you hold lavish drinking parties with all the finery  
in the middle of the day, while my friends

stand on the public streets seeking dinner invitations?

### Poem 16

I’ll jam it up your ass and down your throat,  
fairy Aurelius and queen Furius,  
you who’ve deduced from my little poems,  
because they’re somewhat soft and sensual, that I’m not quite  
proper.  
I’ll admit that the godly poet ought to be modest of behavior  
himself,  
but there’s no need for his poems to be—  
those only have wit and charm  
if they are somewhat soft and sensual and not quite proper  
and have something in them that might incite an itch,  
not in boys, but in those shaggy gray-beards  
who can scarcely rouse their sluggish members.  
You two, because of what you read about those  
many thousands of kisses, do you think me less than a man?  
I’ll jam it up your ass and down your throat.

### Poem 79

Lesbius is pretty,<sup>13</sup> who denies it? He whom Lesbia loves  
more than you and your whole family line together, Catullus.  
But all the same, that “pretty” Lesbius would sell off Catullus  
and his line<sup>14</sup>  
for just three kisses from his friends.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> L. Calpurnius Piso: father-in-law of Caesar and governor of Macedonia in 57-55 BCE.

<sup>11</sup> I.e. Memmius and Piso.

<sup>12</sup> A Roman vegetation deity commonly portrayed with a large erect penis.

<sup>13</sup> Latin—Pulcher.

<sup>14</sup> I.e. into slavery.

<sup>15</sup> I.e. for any petty motive, without a thought. (The Romans commonly greeted one another with a kiss.)