



Exploring the classical world

Catullus - poetic voices

Hello. I'm Paula James, *Exploring the Classical World*.

I shall be taking a closer look at Catullus. During our discussions, you'll hear readings in Latin by Martin Thorpe and in English translation by Leighton Pugh.

To get an idea about combining emotional response to Catullus' poetry with a learned look at how the poetry works, how it was received in its own day and what it tells us about the poet's world, we went to Reading to record an interview with OU PhD student, Kate Hammond. Kate handed over her babies, twin girls, to her husband David and talked to us about her personal and academic relationship with Catullus.

I began by asking Kate to tell us about her personal journey in Catullan studies over the years and how her acquaintance with the poet started.

Kate

Well, I've been studying Catullus all my life really, it started with O and A levels back at school when I read the love poetry and the occasional poems. Those are poems which aren't necessarily about love but little things like the death of his girlfriend's pet sparrow, he tries to cheer her up in this rather endearing little funeral elegy, and other poems, but mostly the poems about love for Lesbia.

Paula

They have stood the test of time, haven't they? For example, *Let Us Live and Let us Love*.

Poem 5 – *Let Us Live and Let Us Love* by Catullus – read in Latin

Poem 5 – *Let Us Live and Let Us Love* by Catullus – read in English

Kate

At that point, I was taking very much a formalist approach and, I suppose I'd define that as studying literature very much for its own sake, using the poem itself and not really going beyond it. I was happy to read poems just as love poems without really knowing much of the context.

Paula

And Catullus is a rich source here. For instance, the kisses which appear in *Let Us Live and Let Us Love* are taken up in Poem 7.

Poem 7 – *How many kisses are enough?* – read in Latin

Poem 7 – *How many kisses are enough?* – read in English

Paula

There's another poem which concentrates on kisses which appears very romantic to the modern reader.

Kate

Yes, they're often read as a pair, aren't they, those two, Poem 5 and Poem 7. Both of them, I think, I mean, at this point, I'd be thinking about the challenges they were making to the

standard Roman viewpoint of what life should be about. Life then was meant to be about duty to your country and here you've got Catullus who's got lack of respect for age, he talks about 'severe old men', he wants love not duty, and it's a pretty decadent lifestyle he's describing, kissing all the time, not going off and doing military exploits for your country. And it's the style of the relationship as well. I mean, a Roman man was just meant to have sex and move on, really, with a woman, but this is reciprocal affection, he's talking about kisses and a life together, loving each other, it's completely different really to anything I'd read before in Latin. And then, as well, it's not a *Gather ye rosebuds while ye may* poem, an unwilling virgin having to be wooed over quickly, it's much more of a long term idea, he wants our brief lives to be in the way we want them, not have other people say, not what tradition dictates to us.

Paula

It seems to be you were already putting the poems in a context or at least contrasting what they might mean to us now, what they meant in the Roman context, in fact. So things were changing. Your academic relationship with Catullus seemed to be progressing as you studied the poet at university?

Kate

Yes, I mean, obviously, I'm still very keen on the love side, as a eighteen to twenty one year old, I was actually, you know, sometimes adapting his poems myself for my own poetry. I mean, a one-sided love affair is ideal for a student, isn't it, you know, unrequited love? Even in Poem 5, you can almost hear Lesbia saying, 'How many kisses do you want?' She's very much the person who's ruling it but he's driving the relationship. And then, for me as a woman, Catullus actually often takes the woman's side, so it's absolutely perfect for me to use in my own poetry because he adopts the female role. Poem 11 which I'll just paraphrase the last verse, he says, desperately sad last few lines, 'Don't look back to my love as you did before, that's fallen through your fault, just like a flower at the edge of a field, after it's been touched by a plough running over it'. I mean what an image of him as a flower cut down by this female plough which of course is a male metaphor really but he's reversed them. So very interesting.

Paula

There seems to be an awful lot there, as you say. The sexual metaphor of ploughing is the metaphor that one attaches to the male, he's the plough ploughing the field of the woman but also it has almost a tragic timbre to me, because this is a very epic simile which we've met when looking at the works of Homer, about the hero cut down in his prime by the plough when he's been slaughtered by his opponent in the Trojan War. So there's plenty going on here.

Kate

Yes. Yes. And I think that's the thing. Once you get to university, you read so much more and, I mean, I started to go beyond my Fordyce edition which I had at school and at university, but even then, I remember, if we had a poem to study which was not in the Fordyce text, we didn't have another text to read, we had a photocopy of something, no commentary, I mean, this is the late eighties I'm talking about so you really didn't (get) to see some of Catullus but this is one I did. And these were poems on Caesar, Caelius, Mamurra, Memmius, Vatinius, Clodius, key names of the Republic of Rome and suddenly, these were beginning open to me because these were the naughty poems that I wasn't allowed to read earlier. And these were the poems at university I could study much more in context because I knew a bit more about Republican Rome to fit them in. And I also wanted to know about that woman, this Lesbia woman. What sort of a woman lies behind that mask?

Now, at the same time as I'm reading Catullus, I'm also now at university reading lots of other things including some speeches of Cicero. And one of those is the Pro Caelio, the defence of Caelius. And this is really interesting because it has a character assassination, really wicked of Cicero but brilliant to read, of a sister of Clodius. Now she's the wife of Metellus Celer, the counsel of 60 so this could be Catullus' girlfriend and we've got a whole speech of Cicero talking about her. There are two other sisters it could possibly be but really this one does fit best.

And then I started to think, Well, what's Catullus doing going out with the sister of Clodius, and more to the point, what's she doing going out with him? She's the Jackie Kennedy or the Hillary Clinton even of her day. And what's she seeing in Catullus?

Paula

Yes, what might someone like Catullus have to offer Clodia? Do we really know anything about Catullus as a person and his status, perhaps, to answer such a question?

Kate

It's all tantalising with Catullus. We've got a few facts. He tells us in his poems that he comes from Cisalpine Gaul. He tells us about a coming-of-age ceremony and this means he must be a Roman citizen, even though Cisalpine Gaul didn't have citizenship at this time, it was a province. He tells us he doesn't really have much money. He talks about his purse being full of cobwebs. But we really have to take this as comparative poverty. He is one of the elite. He's got a lot of assets, possibly short of cash but his family really are very wealthy. We know this as well because Caesar was dining regularly with his father, presumably back in Cisalpine Gaul where Caesar had been governor. All his friends were of the elite and his education included Rhetoric and he shows in his poems that he has an intimate knowledge of Greek Literature, that's not a cheap education that he's had.

He also tells us that he comes back from Bithynia on a sort of Grand Tour of all the Asian towns and all this at his own expense. That wouldn't have been cheap either.

Paula

Can I pick up on this fact about Cisalpine Gaul? You've mentioned it's a province, it doesn't have citizenship, but there seem to be plenty of citizens around, it's called Gallia Togata because of the number of them, so it has colonies and the elite, presumably, have citizenship. I know this is a complicated area and that Colin Andrews has raised some of these things in his book but perhaps you could explain further, Kate?

Kate

Yes. Well, he mentions Verona itself as a colony so we know his home-town had citizenship for its elite at least, for the magistrates. In some of the essays, in the course, are things like the voting assemblies, we've gone through the different voting assemblies and one of them is where the rural tribes would have voted. Cisalpine magistrates would have been entered into those thirty-one rural tribes and if you've got some impact on a rural tribe, you can have an impact in Rome. And the fact that Catullus' family has the major status symbol, the biggest villa in Cisalpine Gaul means that he must have had quite a lot of impact on whichever rural tribe those magistrates were enrolled into.

We also know his family was senatorial by the time of Augustus and consular under Tiberius so there was clearly money enough there to support a political career.

Paula

Now, this is interesting because Catullus wasn't holding political office and there we are, characterising him very much as somebody who wrote love poetry and was a man of leisure rather than a man of labour or duty. Can you tell us a bit more about what Catullus might have been doing? Is he networking?

Kate

Yes, and we have to remember Catullus is only young at this point, we don't know precisely how young because his dates aren't certain. But he's doing all the right things for a young political man. He's getting a name for himself as you were mentioning, through his poetry and he tells us in his poems that he went on a tour of duty with the governor. And perhaps if he had not died young, as we know, he could have gone on for office. You have to remember he's a new man, a *novus homo*, and he wouldn't necessarily have got office at the earliest point. Now, since Sulla, we know that thirty years of age was the youngest when you could go for your first quaestorship, your first office, so really, we don't expect him to be holding office at this point, it's really, as you say, networking, and here he is, making key links with

major families in Rome, the Clodii, the Metelli, or at least until things went wrong and Clodia chose Caelius instead.

Paula

So we can construct Catullus and his love life to a certain extent, we think, from the poetry. We can also start constructing a Catullus who networks, who has a public life, who has political aspirations from poems as well.

Poem 10 by Catullus read in Latin

Poem 10 by Catullus read in English

Paula

How much can we accept this as fact? How much of Catullus' poetry can we take literally when he's talking about his political life?

Kate

We have to be very careful. Clearly it's poetry and we can't take poetry as fact, it's not biography. I mean, Catullus can write about a dinner party but that doesn't mean at all that one ever took place. But there's a difference when he writes as himself, as 'I', when he talks about 'I Catullus' and he addresses himself in the third person, as Catullus. Now, that's slightly different from creating a persona. What Catullus does that's different is it's actually Catullus who's speaking, he addresses himself, Catullus, stop loving, Catullus. And that's the difference and nobody had done that before, as far as I can find anyway. The other way of looking at it is to look at how the ancients themselves read and what's very clear there is if a poet speaks as 'I', they thought it meant the poet, so they didn't read it as a persona. And so, if that's what the ancient critics did, that's what I think Catullus would have been expecting his reader to do, so if the ancient critics reconstructed biography from poems, that's what Catullus would expect his reader to do and I think that's what we can do to a certain extent, obviously, with many caveats.

Paula

I know this is quite a controversial area, and that you're writing about it in your thesis, Kate. It also takes us back to discussions we've had in earlier blocks of this course about the identity of the poet on the page or on the papyrus. And the poet as a real historical person. Catullus' contemporary readership or at least some of them and some of his audience might know quite a lot about the real man, the historical figure Catullus.

Kate

Yes, that's the fact that we often forget, isn't it? That his friends know what's actually going on, they know the truth behind the poems, and if he's just broken up with Clodia, they'd know about it, and these are the people he's actually writing for, isn't he?

Paula

But also, people who weren't such good friends of Catullus would be receiving these poems, wouldn't they?

Kate

Yes, he mentions a Caelius as a rival in Poem 58. And that's a particularly interesting poem because that Caelius could possibly be Caelius Rufus, the Caelius Rufus we know about from Cicero's *Pro Caelio*.

Poem 58 by Catullus read in Latin

Poem 58 by Catullus read in English