



Exploring the classical world

Catullus - political worlds

Paula

So you were becoming more intrigued by the political elements of the poem and what kind of conclusions we could draw from these. And very importantly and controversially whether Catullus' poetry could be mined for information on the political and social scene of the late Republic. You mentioned Clodius and Caelius. Tell us a bit more about the political elements of the poems in which they appear. Is that a major message?

Kate

It's definitely part of the message. How major is difficult to tell. I don't want to forget the actual poetry of Catullus and this poem is a prime example of how Catullus gets his message across, both through his sound effects and through the actual words he uses. It's only a short poem and I'd like just to have a look at some of the lines of it. You start off:

*Caeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa.
Illa Lesbia, quam Catullan unam...etc*

How many times have you got Lesbia mentioned? Three times in two lines. You've got Caelius at the beginning, Catullus at the end, Lesbia in the middle. So you've got the rivals on either side of her with her in the middle. You've got that *Caiasmus Lesbia illa, illa Lesbia*.

And then you've got all these sound effects which are wonderful. We start off with all these long sounds, *Caeli, Lesbia, nostra, Lesbia illa*. Euphonic sounds to the Romans, they liked As and Os and Us, naturally long accents.

And then you get this *nunc* and everything changes and the last two lines,

*Nunc in quadriuiis et angiportis
Glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes.*

You can really hiss these words out, you've got the 'e's and 'i' s, short sounds, rapid, ugly words, literally hissing these words out.

And then it suddenly changes, you've got *magnanimi* and you think, Ah, we're going to go into nice things again, we've got those A sounds and then we get *Remi*, this oxymoron of great-spirited Remus, well, he's the wrong one, it should be Romulus, but Romulus would sound too nice, but we want a short sound - *Remi*.

So what a wonderful poem in those sound effects. Now to get back to the message, this political message. Now, this is real character assassination stuff, isn't it? It's a bit like going back to Cicero. His Lesbia, this very high elite woman, well, what's she doing now? She's on the back streets and cross roads, doing all sorts of strange things, we don't really know what she's doing but it's certainly sordid and not what Roman ladies should be doing to all these grandsons of Remus. So it's nasty things with lots of different people, she's a common prostitute, this is cheap, it's sordid.

Now, a few other points I want to make on this, perhaps linking up with some of the things I've already said but, if this is Marcus Caelius Rufus, we've got the link with the Pro Caelio, we know about this man. It's a serious attack on one of the most noble and powerful families in Rome, we mustn't let ourselves get away from the fact that the Clodii are really a key family, they're one of the families. And this is why I want to go on to the risks that Catullus is taking.

Now he's attacking this family and we know what this family does to the people who attack it, we've got Cicero, he was an ex-consul and he was exiled really by this family because he made an attack on Clodius. Cicero had friends and family to back him up, power as an ex-counsel. Now we've got Catullus. What's to stop Clodius sending round the bully-boys? We know all sorts of hideous happened to Vetius because he upset Clodia so how's Catullus taking all these risks? How's he protecting himself? And I think this is where we have to think, this isn't a penniless poet from a backwater, this is a man with his own powerful client backing who would be providing him with a bodyguard. We have to remember there's no police then to guard people, so these risks, I think, really do challenge our picture of Catullus as just a poet. He's taking risks here with a key family who could really get back at him, if they wanted to and I think they would have done.

Paula

Well, that's interesting, Kate, because one of the things that I tried to do in my essay was say that, although insult, calumny was a common way of communicating in the Roman world - there were no laws of libel or slander - we can perhaps not realise the significance of insults of this vehemence and violence in poetry like Catullus'. You've given us a very clear explanation of the attack in Poem 58. There's something more subtle going on in Poem 79, the poem where Lesbius is mentioned.

Poem 79 by Catullus – read in Latin

Poem 79 by Catullus – read in English

Paula

So, Kate, what's so inflammatory about this poem?

Kate

Yes, it's pretty subtle isn't it, and this is a perfect example where you have to have the context to understand the poem. With the context, you know that there's two really serious attacks here, incest and homosexuality. The incest refers back to this line where he talks about Lesbia preferring him '*to you and all your clan, Catullus*'. This links to Plutarch and Cicero and we know from them that Clodius was accused of sleeping with all three of his sisters. Cicero in fact used to pretend to get confused and call Clodius, Clodia's husband not her brother. That happens in the *Pro Caelio*. Now, incest was one thing that was strictly taboo in Roman society.

The second attack is what we might term 'the impure mouth'. No one wants to kiss Clodius as - and this is the sub-context - he's been indulging in oral sex either with a man or a woman. Now homosexuality is actually the wrong term to use. For the Romans, men could sleep with whoever they wanted, that could be men or women, girls or boys, it didn't matter so long as they didn't 'act like the woman' as they termed it. Now, although it may seem active, performing oral sex was also considered a passive thing, it was considered demeaning and effeminate as well. So does this matter? Well, being effeminate strikes at the heart of the Roman system, you had to be a man to have the right to vote so if you accuse someone of being effeminate, you're undermining their right to vote, and census could actually strike people out of the citizen rolls or at least out of the senatorial rolls for being too effeminate. And we actually know just how damaging this sort of abuse can be. And this takes us on the Julius Caesar himself. Suetonius gives us a very valuable insight in to the effect of Catullus' poems and this is a piece of primary evidence we've got about the effect that Catullus actually had on contemporaries of his time and contemporaries such as Julius Caesar.

Paula

Yes, one has to treat Suetonius with care because he is years after the event but it is interesting what he says about Caesar being magnanimous. I'll read it out:

Reading of Suetonius extract

So perhaps we should remind ourselves of the kind of insult that Catullus was throwing against Caesar and Mamurra in Poem 57 which we printed in the essay.

Poem 57 by Catullus – read in Latin

Poem 57 by Catullus – read in English

Kate

Yes, that poem's got very similar insults really to the one we were talking about earlier about Clodius. It's this passive homosexuality is the central point. Caesar and Mamurra are obviously having sex with each other which means one of them is taking this unacceptable female role. They're also accused of adultery and lack of control and this lack of control is the other aspect. Romans citizens have to keep their emotions under control, that's part of being a Roman citizen. And Caesar and Mamurra are just doing this. They're committing all these different sexual crimes. They're greedy and of course, they really should be there with their elite wives creating sons to their patrician families, or senatorial family in the case of Mamurra, not getting up to these sort of decadent activities, as a Roman would see it.

Paula

Well, it's clear it could be quite damaging, this poem of Catullus. On the other hand, it doesn't always seem to harm Caesar to be known for sexual prowess in any direction really. And later on, he's sung about quite affectionately by his troops because of this kind of reputation. It's very tempting to focus on Caesar but there were some other names in the Suetonius extract and other names that Catullus conjures with. Could you say a bit more about those, Kate?

Kate

Yes. Suetonius mentioned Catullus' great friend Calvus and somebody else very important to Catullus, Memmius, the governor that he went on his provincial tour with. Now, Calvus, we know a little bit about. He was very well known as an orator, even rivalling Cicero to some people ascetic judgment but he had a different sort of speaking style, Calvus preferred the Attic style. That really was a lot less embellishment, less histrionics, much plainer style of speaking to the Asianis style of Cicero. And it's interesting because we know that he wrote verses for Clodius' hired groups to chant, to break up meetings, I think they call them *claqueurs*, they would be ridiculing the people in the meetings, little two-line verses. Now Calvus was writing these, I'm sure Catullus was probably doing the same thing for him.

Calvus is also interesting because he was following a non-military path to the first magistracy, he's using the law courts to gain fame and friends. And through his career and people like Cicero, we realise that the ten year military service requirement really was finished at this point. I mean, a lot of the rules had been broken in the late Republic and Calvus is another example of that.

Catullus also talks about his other friends who are doing the same standard first step, that's going off with a governor to a province, as part of his informal cohort of friends, of friends, companions and advisors and this is where Memmius comes into the poems, Memmius mentioned by Suetonius as anti-Caesar, Catullus went with him to Bithynia possibly in 57 BC and at the same time, his friends were going to Spain with Caesar's father in law and it's very interesting how the same names keep cropping up, don't they, this is now Piso, Caesar's father in law. Memmius had been anti-Caesar but he became a strong ally when he wanted to be counsel and Caesar's got all these links in Bithynia as well, you were mentioning about what the soldiers were singing about Caesar, that was often about him prostituting himself to the king of Bithynia, King Nicomedes. And many of the elite ruling class there would have been linked through Caesar through this political friendship idea, this *amicitia* that the Romans had, these informal friendships, these networks of key people.

Paula

It seems whatever we do our pathways seem to link us back to Caesar, which is logical because he became very powerful and virtually the first emperor. But could we go back to Bithynia and the province and why Catullus would go to the province and what he might get out of it?

Kate

Yes, this is a question that doesn't tend to be asked that much. One of the reasons for going to the province was to build a relationship with the governor to make him your patron or ally, *petronus* or *amicus* is a slightly nicer term for it, makes it seem a little bit more equal. Back in Rome, you then expect him to help you, to support your early political career, he'd use his power to build up your power. Another thing is you'd hope to make some money out of it and of course money is very important for politics because you need this money for bribery and for all the more positive aspects of electioneering. Now governors had a generous allowance which they could share out. And no doubt, there'd be cash-backs and bribes from local people as well that you'd hope to get. As well as making a patron of your governor, you'd also hopefully be making clients. Wherever you go where you meet the local elites, you'd hopefully build up a relationship with them. And when they come to Rome, you'd look after them as their patrons and all of this builds your prestige, doesn't it?

And also, if we look at Memmius in particular, I mean, why did Catullus go with Memmius? There's a literary link, because we know Lucretius dedicated his book to Memmius. Now, maybe that would have made Catullus think that Memmius might be a slightly softer target for him to get to as a friend, as an *amicus*, as a patron.

Paula

But things didn't go quite to plan for Catullus here.

Poem 28 by Catullus – read in Latin

Poem 28 by Catullus – read in English

Kate

Catullus comes out very badly in this poem, doesn't he? In fact, so badly that some critics have wondered what he's actually doing in this poem. I mean, this image of being raped by his governor, for instance, that's hardly within the idea of the manly Roman citizen. And I think there are sort of two ways we can look at this. I mean, firstly, we mustn't forget humour. Catullus is a very funny poet and humour can be used in a way to undermine the sort of effeminacy of the image, he's making it sound funny. It's a wry story about him, he's actually telling the story against himself, it's all ironic, isn't it? Seek noble friends, they said, look where it's got him.

Catullus isn't alone in his suffering, I mean, he brings in his friend Cinna. He didn't do any better and Veranius and Fabullus in the poem as well, they didn't get on any better either. Then there's quite an ingenious explanation that's been suggested. I said earlier that Memmius was an enemy of Caesar and that Caesar had a lot of allies and clients in Bithynia. Now, if Caesar wanted to get back at Memmius, he could get some of his clients to make a protest about how they're being treated, perhaps bring some evidence for extortion, so that Caesar could bring a Prosecution against Memmius which could result in Memmius' exile. In this way, you could actually look at the poem as being a pre-emptive strike. Catullus didn't get anything out of it. Memmius didn't get anything out of it. Nobody got anything out of it because Memmius was such an upright, good provincial manager. And so there's no way he could have been extorting because he didn't take any money from it and even more so, he controlled all these other mini-extorters, these people like Catullus who also could have been extorting money from the locals, he kept them under control, very much under control, so they didn't actually make anything out of it. So that's a very interesting idea. And then you think, well perhaps Catullus was a friend of Memmius, even in this poem, or that maybe he hated Caesar even more than he hated Memmius, so, whichever way we take it. Very interesting.

Paula

Well, thanks, Kate, that's an intriguing interpretation of the poem, that it's positive about Memmius in some way. And it shows that we really can gain some understanding of the political situation in Rome from the poetry of Catullus, even if we puzzle over exactly what the meaning is and from what viewpoint Catullus is coming.

This is an interesting place to arrive at in Catullus' life and career. We started with him, as you did, at school, a heterosexual love poet who seems to reach out across the centuries and

connect with a universal experience of passion and rejection and here we are with a very Roman and historically specific timbre to his poetry, a very Roman and historically specific Catullus, I suppose, even if he seems to be subverting the Roman way.

Kate

Yes, you talked about journeys and I always think about Catullus, you've got this provincial coming from Cisalpine Gaul into Rome where he's this love poet with all these new things to say about love and I think he's almost more accessible to us in a way than he was to his own contemporaries with the viewpoints he was making about love. Being influenced by that culture at Rome but for a provincial man, what I find most fascinating is how he started to influence that culture as well. He's one of the movers and shakers with the best of them.