

UNIT ONE

CATULLUS: LESBIA'S SPARROW

Introduction

CATULLUS' LIFE AND WORKS

Catullus (Gaius Valerius Catullus, ca. 84-54 B.C.), Rome's first and most popular love poet, was born of a wealthy family in Verona, in the north Italian province of Cisalpine Gaul. As a young man, Catullus moved to Rome, most likely to work on a legal career; soon, however, he turned his attention to literary pursuits, composing at least the 113 poems that survive today before his premature death at the age of thirty.

The poems have been arranged, whether by Catullus himself or some later editor, into three groups: 1-60 are written in a variety of meters and deal with a variety of topics, some of them satirical, many of them love poems or on other personal themes; 61-68 are longer pieces, including a 408-line *epyllion*, or "miniature epic," on the wedding of Peleus and Thetis (64); 69-116 also include lyric, romantic, and satiric pieces, many of them very short and epigrammatic, all of them in the elegiac meter. In his opening poem, Catullus called upon his Muse to inspire him in the writing of verse that would endure beyond a single generation (1.10: *plus uno maneat perenne saeclo*), a prayer that has certainly been fulfilled.

THE LESBIA POEMS

About twenty-five of Catullus' poems vividly depict his relationship with a woman whom he calls Lesbia (after the Greek poetess, Sappho, from the island of Lesbos) but who may confidently be identified with Clodia, a wealthy, enchanting aristocrat, sister of Cicero's nemesis P. Clodius Pulcher. Although ten years younger than Clodia, whom he met while her husband Quintus Metellus Celer was governor of Cisalpine Gaul, Catullus fell passionately and hopelessly in love with the woman, for she was both many-talented and beautiful. The Lesbia poems trace vividly

the young man's initial infatuation, his happiness at the height of the romance, and his final bitter disillusionment at Clodia's eventual infidelity. The affair, begun perhaps in 59 B.C., is alluded to in poems dating as late as 55 or 54 B.C. Catullus died shortly thereafter, of a broken heart, as some romantically suppose.

The two poems presented here (Catullus 2 and 3) describe Clodia's affection for her pet sparrow and date to the earliest period of the love affair; the meter of both is hendecasyllabic.

Catullus 2

| | |
|---|----|
| - - // - - / - - / - - / - - | |
| "Passer, dēliciae meae puellae, | 1 |
| - - / - - // - - / - - / - - | |
| quicum lūdere, quem in sinū tenēre, | 2 |
| - - / - - // - - / - - | |
| cui primum digitum dare appetenti | 3 |
| et ācris solet incitāre morsus, | 4 |
| cum dēsideriō meō nitenti | 5 |
| cārum nescio quid lubet iocārī | 6 |
| (et sōlāciolum suī dolōris, | 7 |
| crēdō, ut tum gravis acquiescat ardor), | 8 |
| tēcum lūdere sicut ipsa possem | 9 |
| et tristis animi levāre cūrās! | 10 |

- 1 passer, passeris, M.: sparrow (or some other small bird).
dēliciae, dēliciārū, F. pl.: pet, darling.
meae puellae: here and elsewhere in his poetry Catullus uses this expression for his girlfriend Lesbia.
- 2 quicum = quōcum: "with whom."
lūdō, lūdere, lūsī, lūsum: to play; complementary infinitive (like tenēre, dare, and incitāre) with solet (line 4).
sinus, sinūs, M.: lap, bosom.
- 3 digitus, digiti, M.: finger; with primum, "fingertip."
appetenti: "eager"; modifies cui (adjective and noun, or pronoun, were often widely separated in Latin verse—cf. ācris . . . morsus, line 4).
- 4 ācris = ācrēs, acc. pl.
solēō, solēre, solitus sum: to be accustomed to.
incitō, incitāre, incitāvī, incitātum: to provoke.
morsus, morsus, M.: bite.
- 5 cum, conjunction: when, whenever.
dēsiderium, dēsideriū, N.: desire, longing; loved one.
nitenti: "shining," "beautiful."
- 6 cārus, -a, -um: dear, precious.
nescio quid: "something."
lubet = libet, libēre, libuit, impersonal verb: it pleases; takes a dative object (here, dēsideriō)
iocārī: "to tease," "to play with."
- 7 sōlāciolum, sōlāciolī, N.: bit of comfort; sc. es.
dolor, dolōris, M.: pain (of love).
- 8 crēdō, crēdere, crēdidī, crēditum: to trust; here parenthetical.
ut, conjunction: so that.
acquiescat: "may become quiet."
ardor, ardōris, M.: heat of passion.
- 9 sicut, conjunction: just as.
ipsa: "your mistress" (literally, "she herself").
possem: "would that I might be able" (takes complementary infinitive).
- 10 tristis, triste: sad, grim; tristis = tristēs, acc. pl.
levō, levāre, levāvī, levātum: to alleviate, lighten.