Catullus’s Circle of Friends

Catullus was born into a wealthy family of Verona, around 82 BCE. He was a rebel of the Latin world, a great poet, and a man with a big heart. In poem one, he applauds Cornelius’s bold effort to “explicate the history of the world in just three papyrus rolls” and offers him his book. Cornelius Nepos was an historian from Cisalpine Gaul who wrote a three-volume history, *Chronica*. Let’s imagine that this is Catullus’s first book of poems and that he gives it to his mentor. He did, in fact, dedicate his poems to Nepos. In the poem he is modest, but at the same time bold, asserting that the book “will be remembered for all eternity.” He can be gentle with “Veranius,” whom he affectionately calls “Veran,” taking him into his home after his travels, and listening to his stories, desiring to “kiss your mouth, your sweet eyes.” He is happy in the company of his friend. Then there’s “Lesbia,” the woman that scholars believe Catullus fell in love with in Rome. Her real name was Clodia, and she was the daughter of Appius Claudius Pulcher, consul in 79 BCE and sister of Clodius Pulcher. She belonged to a distinguished Latin family. To Catullus, she is “the epitome of beauty.” But Catullus writes in poem eighty-six, it her very beauty “that attracts all these other women to her.” During the Roman Imperial Era references to same-sex relations between women are more frequent than during the

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1 All the following translations of Catullus are my own.
Republic. Since Romans believed that the sexual act required a dominant and a passive partner and was essentially “phallic” in character, portrayals of women included phallic acts, such as penetrating boys with a dildo. In poem seventy-nine, Catullus speaks of Lesbia’s desire to obtain his boy for pleasure. Clodia married Caecilius Metellus Celer, in 63 BCE and was eventually suspected of poisoning him to death. Catullus, who had an affair with her during her marriage, speaks about her terrible rages and insults her husband by suggesting he knows this aspect of her personality very well indeed:

Lesbia screams and insults me in front of her husband and the simple-minded fool simply grins. He’s evidently content and knows nothing! Listen now, you mule!, if she could forget about me she’d shut up and not throw these crazy fits: but because she whines like a little girl and hurls curses at me means she remembers me, and what is much worse, infinitely worse, is that when she’s really pissed (like now!) she works herself up into a state of rage beyond belief and then begins to talk and talk and talk!

After her husband’s death, she has an affair with Caeluis, one of Catullus’s friends. In the following poem, Catullus suffers a fit of jealousy as Lesbia ignores him and fixes her eyes on yet another man:

To me that man over there seems equal to a god and I mean no offense to any sacred law, but I think he even surpasses the gods. He sits opposite you, repeatedly looks at you and listens, I can hear your sweet laughter ringing in my ears, and I am quickly silenced.
The result is my wretched state,  
all my sense leaves me. Why?  
Because I realize as he looks at you, Lesbia,  
nothing remains for me.

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My tongue is numb, a fire burns in my groin.  
Now my ears are ringing with the sound  
of their mutual laughter. I am insane with jealousy!

Thankfully, the night covers both my eyes in darkness.  
Idleness, Catullus, that is your trouble,  
the reason for your manic static and paralyzing despair.  
Remember, a life of leisure has brought kings to their knees  
and prosperous cities to utter ruin.

She even lures a man that Catullus himself was interested in  
away from him. He is weakened and hurt by her fluctuating love  
and writes, “it’s just the same story over and over again. / Her words can’t be trusted. / They might as well have been written in the air.”

On the other hand, there is the fury and hatred that Catullus expresses in the poems. Catullus will not be pushed around or, to put it more plainly, and in contemporary terms: he wouldn’t have taken lightly being called a faggot in the street. In poem sixteen, he tells Aurelius and Furius that he’ll “face-fuck and sodomize” them both if they think that because he writes lines like “I’ll give you a thousand kisses” his virility is compromised. They think his verses are indecent and “prissy.” He writes, “the true poet should be chaste in his life but not necessarily in his verses.” He also challenges Ravidus who thinks only a “corrupt mind” would read his verses. The Filth and the Fury all over again! Catullus makes the headlines and the caption reads: “Catullus face-fucks Ravidus to death.” It should be noted here that there was a difference between Roman and Greek homosexuality. The Romans, in fact, had no precise term for homosexuality or heterosexuality. The dichotomy with regard to sexuality was expressed as active (sodomy)/masculine and passive (fellatio)/feminine. Roman men were free to have sex with males with-
out any perceived loss of masculinity or social status, provided
that they took the dominant role which meant penetration. For
this reason, in poem eighty, Catullus mocks Gellius whom he
believes engages secretly in oral sex with men. In poem fifteen,
“Ad Marcum Tullium Ciceronem,” he threatens Aurelius. Catul-
lus tells him that if he has sex with his boy, Juventius, he will
stuff radishes and mallets into his anus. And then there is Mar-
cus Tullius (Cicero), who is only one in a line of pompous ora-
tors that Catullus satirizes:

You’re one of the most eloquent orators
from the descendants of Romulus
and there are just as many others now,
Marcus Tullius,
and more to come!,
but thank you for thinking of me,
the great Catullus
the worst poet,
the absolute worst,
just like you who are the Patron of all!
p.s. I wish you my best.

Then there are the complicated relationships with Gellius and
Juventius. Gellius was a consul in 36 BCE and a commander
in Mark Antony’s navy at Actium in 31 BCE. He has an affair
with Clodia and with his uncle’s wife. He is also accused by the
Senate of having an affair with own his stepmother. In poem
eighty-nine, Catullus emphasizes Gellus’s “thinness” as a qual-
ity of moral depravity. Catullus is implying that he is “thin” like
a girl. In the Roman world a feminine man was looked down
upon and likely to be passive in a sexual encounter. His “femi-
ninity” was in opposition to the Roman “cult of virility.” Cat-
ullus sums up his opinion of Gellius in poem ninety-one, af-
ter having found out about his affair with Clodia: “you delight
in every game, no matter what, / as long as it’s even a tiny bit
transgressive.” Juventius, Catullus’s boyfriend, was born into a
rich family. In Roman antiquity boys were bought and sold as sex objects, but the buyer needed the owner’s permission before having sex with his boy. In poem fifteen, Catullus tells Aurelius, “When you’re randy, I know you’ll fuck anything! / But please keep away from my boyfriend, Juventius.” Juventius consistently frustrates Catullus’s love. Poem eighty-one, “Ad Iuventium,” is characteristic:

Juventius, from all the pretty men in all the bathhouses in Rome,
couldn’t you have picked up someone other than this young punk from the filthy district of Pisaurum? The only thing yellower than his complexion is that old gilded statue of Caesar! And, to make matters worse, you say he turns you on! You mean you like him more than me? Can’t you see you’re being a real asshole?

Catullus’s poems are a Dionysian orgy of lust and ecstasy and hatred that clash with the genteel, aristocratic heritage, whose embodiment is the affluent Clodia, whose family was of the famous Claudian line. She rejects him and causes him great pain on numerous occasions. Even the boy, Juventius, and the young man, Gellius, are figures of deceit and prove unfaithful and resistant to Catullus’s love. Finally, in poem 105, Catullus writes:

Mr. Cock strives to climb up the Parnassus, but the Muses (those sluts!) prick him with their pitchforks and yell, “GET OUT”!

Catullus’s sadism is driven as much by love’s failure as by a genuine disgust with pompous orators and pretension in all its forms. Clodia’s own pretentiousness and profligate nature make Catullus unable to maintain friendly feelings towards her. In fact, the more he loves her the less he is able to treat her with kindness. In
her presence, he reverts to the figure of an innocent schoolboy trying to impress her. She is permanently on the defensive, seated on a pedestal too high for him to reach her. A moment of tenderness occurs with Caelius, with whom he develops a “unique friendship” during a time when the “furious flame scorched my genitals,” perhaps when he was younger or during a moment of loneliness. He wishes him success in love and happiness. But it this same Caelius who, on another occasion, will betray Catullus with Clodia. One rare instance of real affection and love occurs with Veranius, and not with Lesbia, with whom he shares sporadic moments of happiness in an otherwise hopeless love, nor with Ipsitilla, a prostitute with whom Catullus merely has sex, nor with the vain Gellius and not, finally, with the boy, Juvenius. I believe it is important to note that, despite the popularity of the many poems written to Lesbia that are largely a catalogue of difficulties and failures and, admittedly, of great lyrical power, if one is to find moments of real tenderness and love in Catullus’s poetry, however transitory, one has to look to his relations with his male friends. He is a punk with a big heart but not a patheticus, a poet of great lyric power and wit but not someone to mess with when his anger is aroused.

At last there are the following fragments that could serve as an epitaph:

1.
I dedicate to you and consecrate this sacred grove, Priapus
…
in Lampsacus, where your house is and sacred grove
… Priapus … especially for you,
who are worshiped at the mouth of the Hellespont, in the cities
and elsewhere.

2.
my passion is the MEAT
3.

you won’t escape the bite of my poem

Here Catullus praises Priapus, a fertility god marked by a large, permanently erect penis. Fragment three is interesting. Perhaps he is speaking of his doomed love for Clodia, his burning anger and disgust, or does it simply express his confident attitude that his enemies in general will not escape his ridicule and fury? Much of Latin poetry has been consigned to oblivion. Let us be thankful for what remains and, above all, for the poetry of Gaius Valerius’s Catullus.

Works Cited
