

Accessibility: a Catullus for now?

Catullus: Poems of Love and Hate, translated by Josephine Balmer,
Bloodaxe, £7.95, ISBN 1852246456

“One of the main purposes of education is to encourage people to think. But education for its own sake is a bit dodgy” (see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/2712833.stm>). These reported comments of former Education Minister Charles Clarke are from January 2003, and were followed up by the observation that, while he did in fact advocate the study of philosophy, he was “less occupied by the Classics”. The timing of these remarks, in the run up to the second Gulf War, seems either proof of synchronicity or provides further evidence of myopia as this government peers across its long-range cultural origins and present circumstances without an understanding of either.

On the face of it, there might not be much the Blair government and the world of the late Roman Republic, or the first years of Augustus, have in common, but all the poets of that period seemed to be against war except Virgil (and possibly Horace). Their engagement with the subject now sounds urgent and relevant. Neither Catullus (84–54 BC) nor the later Roman elegists had much time for the pursuit of war or the manipulations of politicians, except as metaphor for love and illicit bedroom activity. Catullus is famous for his excoriations of Caesar, Propertius for his avoidance strategies around dedicating books of poetry to Augustus and his military exploits. Much is made of his use of the rhetorical device the “recusatio”, or refusal, to write of wider political and public themes. Tibullus and Ovid are even more overt in their rejections of the soldier’s life. Consider Propertius’s *Elegies* (II.15):

If every man wanted to live their life like mine,
at leisure, arms and legs droopy with wine
There would be no vicious blades or war galleons,
Actium’s waves would not break on our bones,
Nor Rome, often victim of her own ambitions
shy away from proper displays of grief.
This thing our forebears will grace us with certitude:
our skirmishes never caused gods fury.
(my translation)

Clarke has also levelled the charge that subjects worthy of study “need a relationship with the workplace”. All sorts of questions are raised with this

remark. If you want to become a politician, what about Cicero's speeches, or Plato or Aristotle? Where else is the foundation of Western democracy other than in the Ancient worlds of Greece and Rome? Where else would you find the ideological bases of New Labour and the Neo-Cons and the institutions they exist in? So much of contemporary culture is still presented in Graeco-Roman terms, and most negative aspects of empire are latent in this background and history: slavery, the second-class status of women, racism, elitism, jingoism, and nationalism. These concepts, and ways of being and living, start in Greece and Rome for Western democracies, and need to be traced in their terms, before they can be related to our own.

Catullus became the most translated Latin poet in the twentieth century (see *Catullus in English*, Julia Haig Glaiser, Penguin, 2001). This trend has accelerated the translation of other Latin poets of this period in the last fifteen to twenty years. Ovid and Propertius, in particular, have benefited. As study of the Classical languages has decreased over recent years, translations have increased with the popularity of courses in Latin and Greek cultural history. Therefore, if students are to become reliant on English versions of Ancient texts then they should be the best representations of that culture at all levels of translation, from the textual through the contextual to the cultural.

Doubtless Charles Clarke would find much to approve in the new Catullus of Josephine Balmer. If we are going to tolerate the Classics in our ahistorical culture of immediacy, transparency and instant understanding then this is the Catullus for the age of New Labour. Balmer reveals her aesthetic with that watch-word of government education and arts policy: "accessibility". Her principle of translation is based "most importantly, on a desire for the poetry to be as accessible as possible, as enjoyable . . . to those with no prior knowledge of Latin or the poet." Toward this goal, Balmer presents the poems thematically, and gives them titles. She cuts out almost all the long poems, the ones of difficulty, with mythological themes and alien marriage rituals, to leave the epigrams and shorter elegies. This editing exaggerates Catullus's blessing and curse: he seems so fresh, so adolescent, so "now".

But what is wrong with Balmer's approach? Don't the poems become more understandable to an audience of the twenty-first century? They certainly come to resemble the discreet lyric, acceptable as the modern face of English poetry since 1950. However, the 116 poems are in an order already coherent and intelligent, and make sense with a little effort of study. The order could have been concocted in the Renaissance, as Balmer points out, but recent research about papyrus of the late Republican period is compelling. The argument goes that the physical length of the papyrus roll fits perfectly the three groups (or "books") Catullus has made by metre. That the poems

should have come down to a modern audience in this way Balmer calls “the second miracle”. I believe in that miracle, a chiasmic miracle that pivots at the very centre of the book in Poem 64: Theseus’ black-sailed boat disappears from Ariadne’s gaze and looms on the horizon for Aegeus, his father, without the white sail that would signify Theseus’ safe return. The black sail Aegeus sees he misinterprets as a sign of his son’s death, and so he throws himself from the cliff-tops. Cutting out long poems like Poem 64 destroy the symmetry and design that is quite other to contemporary ideas of aesthetic order, but absolutely vital and necessary to a clear view of this book and the late Roman Republic.

There is other evidence that corroborates this interpretation. The codex (a way of distributing text that resembles the modern book) was not invented until c.70 AD, a hundred years after Catullus. Martial’s epigrams appeared in this form. A change of format changes a book’s length, and it seems plausible there would have been texts circulating of this type by Catullus. Or maybe not. We know Catullus had “disappeared” by the second century AD; perhaps this was not only because his style of poetry had become unfashionable, but also because the format in which it was distributed was no longer cutting edge enough for the literati. A bit like carting around a Corona typewriter when everyone else carries an iBook.

Further to this “physical” evidence, Catullan aesthetics are also problematic for Balmer’s project. Catullus was part of a group called the neoterics. They based their art on learning, and allusion, and saw their tradition beginning with Alexandrian poets writing in Greek, like Callimachus. Most importantly of all, their aesthetic was based on form, and, I suspect, not just in individual poems but also as design of a whole group or book of poems. Their idea was to wear learning very much on the sleeve, to show-off. And indeed, it is important to realise that Catullus was writing for *literary* friends, and those of a certain class, not anybody like a general reader. Coterie was good not bad. Our idea of accessibility would seem not only alien to Catullus, but hostile to this notion of championing difficulty. The translator of Catullus and academic Charles Martin has likened Catullus and the group around him to the early High Modernists, Eliot, Pound, etc, and it is certainly true that Catullus’s aesthetic seemed attractive to Pound, and was an influence on his poetry.

Then, in Balmer, there is the twenty-first-century apparatus: the use of themes and titles as an organisational principle of the collection, which is severely flawed. No Latin poet uses titles for their poems. They (Catullus in particular) would be completely bewildered with this innovation, and would see these signposts as entirely misleading. The ordering by theme harks back to a trend for Catullan translation from the 1930s and 1940s: at best it appears

quaint now. Critically, the ordering of poems by theme starts to break down as we see Poem 45 (using the original “three book” numbering) appear on page 66 with its own section, “IV Love, Requited”. One short lyric with its own section? This quirk highlights the weakness of thematic methodology, and reads both awkwardly and lamely.

A more compelling argument, still, against the thematic organisation of poems has to do with repetition. Group all the really great poems together and their repetitions and refrains become boring. These are poems that should be separated by other poems, and opened out with other ideas and preoccupations, not bunched and corralled into themes like sheep. To sort the poems into these groupings misses the vitality of the poet’s work. All these poems, on their various topics, reflect a various shape to a very particular life. There are poems about Catullus’s affair with Lesbia, poems to friends, to enemies, his criticism of career politicians, poems on myths – all these are part of a rich, precious, detailed and unquantifiable life, a continuum. The strange mix that are the “three books” reflect this life under a discipline of various poetic forms and metres. The ordering of the texts fundamentally determines how we read them in their detail; the entirety matters as much as the minutiae, so Balmer’s sound and sometimes terrific translations get buried by this misleading imposition of thematic accessibility.

Poems of Love and Hate crosses the boundary from creative representation to a dangerously twisted caricature of this body of work and the society that bore it. Reducing Catullus’s “books” to a thematic structure means we can’t see through to the culture of the late-Roman Republic; Josephine Balmer interprets the work of this great Roman poet, moving away from its cultural roots, crushing it into a shape that resembles our own. There is no respect for difference here, and in overturning aesthetic values the cultural ones are obfuscated too. This book, in other words, fulfils all the accessibility criteria whilst failing those of authenticity.

The more one studies Catullus the less his world seems to resemble ours: on that impression many translators, commentators and scholars have agreed. It is an indictment of where we are now, and a weakness of our own literary culture, that a translator of Balmer’s capabilities should see these differences homogenised and not cherished.

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