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# CATULLUS PURIFIED: A BRIEF HISTORY OF CARMEN 16

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CATULLUS PURIFIED:  
A BRIEF HISTORY OF CARMEN 16

THOMAS NELSON WINTER

Paedicabo ego vos et irrumabo,  
Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi,  
qui me ex versiculis meis putastis,  
quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum.  
5 Nam castum esse decet pium poetam  
ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est,  
qui tum denique habent salem ac leporem,  
si sunt molliculi ac parum pudici  
et quod pruriat incitare possunt,  
10 non dico pueris, sed his pilosis,  
qui duros nequeunt movere lumbos.  
Vos quod milia multa basiorum  
legistis, male me marem putatis?  
Paedicabo ego vos et irrumabo.

“The obscenity of Catullus has long been a stumbling block,” writes C. H. Sisson.<sup>1</sup> Carmen 16 probably offers more of an impediment to the translator than any other poem in the corpus. It seems also to have suffered more: coyly rendered, opaquely rendered, bowdlerized, and finally truncated through being misunderstood, this poem may show how some losses have occurred in the transmission of classical texts.

An obvious difficulty is in the repeated first and final line. What can a translator do with it? Until recently, English as forthright as the Latin could never be printed. A variety of circumlocutions have been tried. Though far short of the original, F. A. Wright’s “I’ll show you I’m a man”<sup>2</sup> captured the essence of the meaning. Jack Lindsay tried “Aurelius down, you’ll knuckle under! / Furius up! Admit your blunder!”<sup>3</sup> — brilliant for those readers who already knew the original. Horace Gregory’s version is clearer, but such clarity as it adds is overbalanced by the lack of Lindsey’s wit and grace: “Furius, Aurelius, I’ll work your / own perversions on you and your persons.” He has, for the same line at the end: “Come at me, and I’ll be ready / to

defile you and seduce you.”<sup>4</sup> Best so far is Roy Arthur Swanson’s “I’ll snag you and gag you,”<sup>5</sup> felicitous, concise, Catullan, and capable, in its context, of representing the Latin.

On the whole, the more abashed school of translators has done better than a more recent translator, who, though the times have freed him to use words of a nature appropriate to the Latin of Catullus, has chosen the wrong ones. The noted Classicist John Jay Bateman hails Sisson’s translation as including “the only honest rendering of Poem 16 that I have seen in print,”<sup>6</sup> but fails to warn the reader that the honesty was in the attempt and not in the product. Sisson renders the first line (*op. cit.* 35) “All right, I’ll bugger you and suck your pricks.” In an appendix wherein Sisson completes the poem (187) the last three lines thus become:

You, because you read about thousands of kisses,  
think I must be effeminate.  
All right, I’ll bugger you and suck your pricks.

This version has Catullus indignant about the raillery of his friends in one breath and offering to substantiate it in the next. The meaning of *irrumabo* has been reversed.

Such a rendition was the inevitable end of the centuries of maltreatment in which several factors have acted in concert to leave the poem abused and misunderstood. The universal use of only a part of the poem, the proper, restrained silence of the scholars, and anachronistic applications of current standards of morals and tastes have led to misunderstandings and finally mutilations — a train of sufferings which may have happened to works of Catullus before.

The commentaries have done little more than assure the reader that Catullus does not really mean the threats of lines 1 and 14. Such was the thrust of exegesis throughout the nineteenth century. Progress has been somewhat retrograde. Much recent work on 16 has revolved around whether the inspiration of the poem is Epicurean. Worse is the complete silence of one of the more recent commentaries. C. J. Fordyce explains: “A few poems which do not lend themselves to comment in English have been omitted.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet the poem — or rather a portion of it — has been a landmark in literary criticism. Two lines, 5 and 6 (“The poet can’t be chaste enough,/ but verse is made of different stuff,” *tr.* Lindsay) have served as a proof-text, leaving poets of succeeding ages to feel free

to write what they wished. These lines seem echoed by an apologetic Ovid:

crede mihi, mores distant a carmine nostro;  
vita verecunda est, musa iocosa mihi  
(*Trist.* 2.353–4).

The Younger Pliny quoted Catullus directly, saying of lines 5–8 “illam esse verissimam legem,” therewith defending his writing of scurrilous verse (*Ep.* 4.14). Martial, subject of frequent censure from his contemporaries, and whose poems are still not completely available in English, quotes lines 5 and 6, and adds this note of his own:

Lex haec carminibus data est iocosis,  
ne possint, nisi pruriant, iuvare  
(1.36.10–11).

Apuleius, with his own pederastic poetry cast in his face during a trial, uses the two lines of Catullus for protection, and a line of the Emperor Hadrian in memory of the Emperor’s friend Voconius: *lascivus versu, mente pudicus eras* (*Apol.* 11.3). The lines of Catullus and Martial were formed by Georges Lafaye into the famous “law of the hendecasyllable” (*Catulle et ses Modèles*, 95–137), i.e., licentious language was not merely permissible in hendecasyllabic verse, but *de rigueur*. Roy K. Hack demoted this *lex* from law to the poet’s excuse in 1914.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the history of the poem has been, for the most part, the history of two of its fourteen lines. Because of their suitability for shielding reputations, the two have called attention to themselves as if they were the whole poem. It was perhaps inevitable that some scholar should consider them just that: the whole poem. F. W. Cornish, responsible for the Loeb text and translation, rendered the first line with three dots. Then, apparently unable to tolerate a Catullus boasting of prurient intent, he ended the text of the poem at line 6. This despite the fact that he claimed to have based his text on that of Postgate, who had given the poem complete, without so much as an asterisk. Cornish labeled Poem 16 “a fragment,” without a clue to the reader that he himself was responsible for the fragmentation. Sisson follows the Loeb text

because it seems to me that the poem is better without them the last eight lines]. In the shorter version, Catullus

is making a point (as always): the additional lines are probably spurious. It is unlike Catullus to exalt the pornographic quality of what he wrote; his mind was too much on his subject (187).

The reasoning is circular: in this poem his subject (which his mind was too much on) is the prurient quality of what he has been writing. May we athetize the prurient lines of Catullus because without them Catullus is not a prurient poet? In any case, the poem, as truncated by the bowdlerism of Cornish and the athetism of Sisson, serves to allow an innocent public<sup>9</sup> to be assured that Catullus was a fine Victorian gentleman without prurient interests, a man proper by our standards. Sisson denies by implication that there is any other point to the poem, and thus maintains Cornish's nineteenth-century anachronism of superimposing current moral standards on the ancient world of the first century B.C.

But what is Catullus going to do about the censure which led to lines 5 and 6? Even in Sisson's cut-off version, the poet had already written it in line one: *Paedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*. Prudish arguments cannot deny the genuineness of the last eight lines if the first line is allowed to stand. From the first line it should be clear that Catullus does not care a fig what his readers think of his piety and chastity from reading his verses, except for what he meant — not necessarily what we have understood — by *pious* and *castus*, the words which have so misled, among others, Cornish, Sisson, and the poor English professors who have to teach “Classical Literature in Translation.”

Does Catullus, calling himself a “pium poetam,” wish to declare himself virtuous and upright? No. Naudet noted in 1869 (*ad loc*):

pium poetam, rite Musarum sacris operantem ... qui Musarum  
sacris initiati sunt, vocantur sacri, sancti, pii.

This, one of the more useful comments on poem 16 produced in the last century, has unfortunately dropped out of the exegetical tradition of the poem. Of the more recent scholars, only Lafaye seems aware of it. Rendering *pium* “pieux,” he notes “pieux envers les Muses, dont il est le prête.”<sup>10</sup> That this is correct may be seen from 14, where

Calvus has sent Catullus an anthology of horrible poems. Asking what he had done to deserve it, he remarks:

Isti dii mala multa dent clienti  
qui tantum tibi misit impiorum.

To return in kind, Catullus says he will compile an assortment from the works of the “saecli incommoda, pessimi poetae:” an “impious” poet is simply bad as a poet. The “goodness” implied in “pium” applies to the quality of the poems and says nothing about the personal behavior of the poet.

*Castus* has been similarly misleading. In the verse of Catullus, it is indeed chaste for a maiden to remain virginal (e.g. 62.45–47), but *castus* is masculine, and therefore a different matter. The bachelor of his day was under no obligation to be virginal or even heterosexual. Prostitution was legal, even sanctioned by Cato the Elder: young men were expected to use it rather than tamper with the respectable ladies.<sup>11</sup> Manlius' male concubine figures prominently in the *iocatio* of his wedding hymn (61. 126–144). Catullus then addresses Manlius:

Scimus haec tibi quae licent  
sola cognita; sed marito  
ista non eadem licent.

It is no longer proper for Manlius to keep him, and the boy has to give up his sinecure. In his moral environment, masculine purity and chastity are defined by Catullus himself. For his public, at least, he is a pederast (e.g. poems 14, 109), and, as the world knows, the lover of a married woman (83 mentions Lesbia's husband). Yet he swears to heaven he has lived a pure life (79.16). Apparently Catullus and his contemporaries believed a man could do almost anything sexually and remain respectable, so long as he stayed within the masculine role. Thus Catullus' insistence on his own propriety and on his potent manhood is all one. Catullus is a proper man. With this background understood, any justification for pruning more than half the poem as a dichotomous *non sequitur* disappears. But with lines 5 and 6 so constantly used out of context, the words *pudicus*, *castus* and *pious* served as a red herring, which Cornish and Sisson followed, even when its trail led to bowdlerism for the one and athetesis for the other.

From first line to last, Catullus' interest is to declare himself a man: he will make a duplicate woman of those who challenge his virility. If we may presume to see the accusation reflected in the

defense, the censure from Aurelius and Furius had not been that he and his poems were *incasti* — “unchaste.” The accusation must have been that he and his poems were *incasti* because they were *molliculi*, “soft little things.”

That some sort of effeminacy is the burden of the charge against Catullus has also been understood by T. E. Kinsey, but to explain why Catullus was deemed effeminate, Kinsey has gone so far as to postulate that he wrote poems, which did not survive, in which he professed to be a *pathicus*.<sup>12</sup> Such a hypothesis seems unlikely in view of poem 16; it is also unnecessary. If one understands the “softness” of the poem to imply impotence, one need go no further than the extant poems to find reason enough for the raillery of Furius and Aurelius. *Mollis* in Catullus does describe the softness of a woman (64.88; 68.70), the softness of a woman’s clothes (65.21; 64.129), and the sleeping-in of Gellius the fellator (80.4). But the meaning depends upon the application: Catullus frequently directs the implications of softness to the virile member. The post-orgiastic sleep of the castrated Attis is twice termed *mollis* (63.38, 44); the detumescent sleep that Venus gives is also “soft” (68.5). Softness is the prime characteristic of Thallus the Pansy, and one of the most extreme examples of this softness that Catullus can think of is a non-virile *membrum virile*:

Cinaede Thalle, *mollior* cuniculi capillo  
vel anseris medullula vel imula auricilla  
vel *pene languido* *senis* situque araneoso...  
(25.1-3)

If it is from *versiculi molliculi* that his friends call him *incastus* or *parum pudicus*, the reason would be his appearing uninterested in, or incapable of, the masculine role. Softness and impudicity are paired off in lines 4 and 8. Finally, when the charge levelled against his character is reprised in line 13, it is “male me marem putastis” instead of “me parum pudicum putastis.” “You think me improper,” in sum, has boiled down to “You think me not a proper man.” They think this because they have read Catullus’ “many thousands of kisses,” apparently a reference to poem 5, which it virtually quotes (v. 5.10.)<sup>13</sup> In drawing our attention to the fifth poem, Catullus allows us to reconstruct his friends’ reaction to it: “Anyone kissing a girl 3,300 times [we may trust such men to have counted] must be incap-

able of anything else.” The ending was perhaps not the sort they had been expecting. Robert Herrick similarly found it less than satisfactory, for his re-doing of poem 5, “To Anthea,” follows Catullus through all the kisses, but differs at the end, which Herrick doubtless considered an improvement over the original:

But yet, though love likes well such scenes as these,  
There is an act that will more fully please:  
Kissing and glancing, soothing, all make way  
But to the acting of this private play:  
Name it I would, but being blushing red,  
The rest Ile speak, when we meet both in bed.

Though they would not have expressed it so delicately, this is clearly the sort of thing Furius and Aurelius would have wished for poem 5. Though Herrick’s poem would seem more complete to Catullus’ friends, and never lead to suspicions of Herrick’s manhood, it is gauche, as the poet himself seems to realize. The contrast is instructive. Herrick attempts to satisfy where Catullus is content to arouse. Catullus does not have to blush. If he insists that such poems as 5 have prurient power, it is because he realizes that a closed door is more effective than an open bed: the one opens the imagination, the other limits it. Furius and Aurelius, unable to appreciate this artistic restraint, were swine before whom Catullus has cast a pearl. Poem 16 gives them the swill that is suited to them, language they can understand. To counter their calling him a pansy for just kissing, he calls them sodomite and catamite. He may not really care what such dense readers think of him as a man, but if they want to know, his offer stands, and remains the ultimate answer to insensitive critics: *Paedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*.

In the sense that this is the normal language of those to whom he directs the poem, it is not obscene. Obscenity, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder. “The obscenity of Catullus has long been a stumbling block,” indeed, but through not making a fair attempt to understand the poem, Sisson, a modern Procrustes, has replaced the “stumbling block” with a chopping block.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *The Poetry of Catullus*, New York, 1967, 8.
- <sup>2</sup> *Catullus: The Complete Poems*, London, n.d., 144.
- <sup>3</sup> *Catullus*, London, 1948, 66.
- <sup>4</sup> *Catullus: Poems*, New York, 1956, 26.
- <sup>5</sup> *odi et amo*. New York, 1959, 17. The best in English, that is. In general, I believe the palm must go to the rendition of Léon Herrman (*Les Deux Livres de Catulle*, Brussels, 1957, 109). English writers labor under a handicap, for the language possesses no equivalent to *irrumare*. Robert Estienne defined it as follows: “est mentulam tamquam mamillam ore alterius inserere, a ruma, id est mamma, ductum verbum” (*Thesaurus Latinae Linguae*, Basel, 1740, s.v.).
- <sup>6</sup> CW, 61 (1968) 254.
- <sup>7</sup> For the Epicurean references, see Jean Granarolo, *L’Oeuvre de Catulle*, Paris, 1967; the statement of Fordyce is in the unnumbered preface to his *Catullus: a Commentary*, Oxford, 1961. Granarolo seems to have put the Epicurean question to rest, concluding justly: “Point n’est besoin, pour expliquer la chose, d’invoquer je ne sais quelle adhésion aux dogmes d’un système ideologique déterminé!” (223)
- <sup>8</sup> “The Law of the Hendecasyllable,” *HSCP* 25 (1914) 107–116.
- <sup>9</sup> Sisson’s version even now represents Catullus for American university English students. English professors teaching the Greek and Latin classics in translation tend to assume that since it uses gross language it must be the “real” or “honest” Catullus. An English professor under such an impression has even recommended Sisson’s translation to me.
- <sup>10</sup> *Catulle: Poésies*, Paris, 1923, 13n. *Pius* tends to imply a relationship: one is *pius* towards others. A poet would appropriately be *pius* toward the muses. One loved by them and remaining on good terms with them writes good verse. The one is often simply an artifice for saying the other, cf. Horace, *Carm.* 1.27; 4.3. The opposite is also true; witness the fate of “Mentula” in Catullus 105, an ingenious and unforgettable judgment on “Mentula” as poet. But D. O. Ross, an even century after Naudet and 46 years after Lafaye (who are absent from his bibliography) can still conceive of “pium” as applying to the poet’s person, and not to his verse (*Style and Tradition in Catullus*, New Haven, 1969, 107).
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. Horace, *Sat.* 1.1.3.–36: *Quidam notus homo cum exiret fornice, “Macte/ virtute esto,” inquit sententia dia Catonis, / “nam simul ac venas inflavit taetra libido, / huc iuvenes aequum est descendere, non alienas/ permolere uxores.”*
- <sup>12</sup> *Latomus* 25 (1966) 106. The idea is inspired by poem 50 and supported by 10.12 and 28.10, where “irrumator” and “irrumasti” are taken more literally than the context permits. The *irrumatio* in each case was figurative and financial.

- <sup>13</sup> In his *Catullus, the Poems* (London, 1970, p. 143) Kenneth Quinn observes that “the explicit cross reference in line 12 is probably to Poem 48 . . . . It is not likely that there is a reference to Poems 5 and 7 (though many take this for granted).” Yet 16.12 comes closest to the words of Poem 5, especially at 5.10. Comparing these two lines makes it extremely tempting to ascribe the reference to Poem 5 and to Poem 5 alone, especially since this assumption explains neatly the accusation, defense, and counter-accusation of Poem 16.