

## Catullus and his Political World: c. 49, c. 93 & c. 52



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Latin 240

## Catullus 49

In this poem Catullus addresses one of Rome's most famous orators and statesmen, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 – 43 BC). Cicero would have been well known as Catullus wrote his poetry, and in fact became consul in 63 BC when Catullus would have been somewhere around 21 years old. While Cicero was famous for this and many other things, among them was his talent to defend individuals in court as a *patronus*, a person from the wealthy classes who would function as a type of lawyer by defending clients in exchange for political and personal support. As you read the poem, consider the following: Why is Catullus thanking Cicero? Is Catullus' expression of gratitude sincere or sarcastic?

METER: hendecasyllables x x – u u – u – u – x

1 **disertus, -a, -um**, articulate, eloquent

**Disertissime**: what form and what case?

**Rōmulus, ī** (m.), Romulus (first king of Rome)

**Nepōs, nepōtis** (m.), grandson, descendant

**Post** functioning adverbially here; translate as “afterwards”

2 **Quot**, indecl. Adj., as many as, however many

**Fuēre** = fuērunt

**Mārce Tullī** = see paragraph above; note that Catullus addresses him formally by using both the praenōmen and nōmen)

6 **Tantō...quantō**, as much as

7 **Patrōnus**: supply **es**

- 1 Disertissime Rōmulī nepōtum,
- 2 quot sunt quotque fuēre, Mārce Tullī,
- 3 quotque post aliīs erunt in annīs,
- 4 grātiās tibi maximās Catullus
- 5 agit pessimus omnium poēta,
- 6 tantō pessimus omnium poēta,
- 7 quantō tū optimus omnium patrōnus.

### Initial Explorations:

1. How many examples can you find of tricolon in the poem? What effect does it have with regards to establishing a tone in the poem?
2. Locate the five examples of superlative adjectives in this poem. What effect do these have with regards to establishing tone in the poem?

### Discussion:

1. Does Catullus give any indication as to why he is thanking Cicero?
2. Readers of Catullus have debated for centuries whether Catullus' expression of gratitude is sincere or ironic in c. 49. What can you find in the text that indicates Catullus is sincere in thanking Cicero? What evidence from the text can you find in the text that indicates his expression of gratitude is ironic?
3. If the poem is ironic, why would Catullus have chosen irony to address Cicero? Could he have chosen another style (e.g. invective) and have the same effect?

## Catullus 93

Another individual with whom Catullus seemed to be quite familiar was Julius Caesar (102/100 – 44 BC). In this poem Catullus provides an opinion of Caesar in a single elegiac couplet. As you read the poem consider the following: What does Catullus say about Caesar? What does Catullus not say about Caesar? What does the poem reveal about the relationship between Caesar and Catullus?

METER: elegiac couplet – uu – uu – || uu – uu – uu – x  
 – uu – uu – || – uu – uu x

1 **Nimium** [adv]: too; too much

**Nīl nimium studeō:** By using both *nil* and *nimium*, to emphasize how he does not even “want to please” Caesar, Catullus introduces an element of pleonasm (i.e. redundancy for emphasis). Also note that in this instance *nīl* = *non*. The phrase as a whole is believed to be a colloquial expression approximate to “I’m not too eager” in English.

**velle:** dependant on *studeō*, just as *scīre* is in line 2.

2 **utrum...an:** [correlatives] whether...or

**albus, a, um** [adj] white

**āter, ātra, ātrum** [adj] black

**albus an āter homo:** Scholars have been hesitant to describe this as an indication of racial prejudice on the basis of skin color. Roman prejudice against those who were different seems to have been centered on cultural and economic differences more than differences in skin color. For more information, consult A. Spawforth “Race” in Oxford Classical Dictionary (Oxford UP, 2004). As for what the phrase ultimately means in the context of the poem, it is perhaps best viewed as contributing to the idea of just how little Catullus is interested in Caesar – even to the point that he does not care to know the most obvious distinguishing characteristic associated with identifying an individual (i.e. skin color).

Nīl nimium studeō, Caesar, tibi velle placēre,

nec scīre utrum sis albus an āter homo.

### Initial explorations:

1. How is it that there are two infinitives right next to each other (*velle placēre*) in line 1?

2. Why is *sis* in the subjunctive mood in line 2?
3. Both *nīl* and *nimium* have a negative force in line 1 (see notes). Does it contribute to establishing a tone for the poem? If so, how?
4. Does interrupting line 1 with a vocative address to Caesar affect the tone of the poem? If so, how?

**Discussion:**

1. What does this poem seem to indicate about the relationship between Catullus and Caesar? Were they on friendly terms? What evidence can you find in the poem to support your answer?
2. Can you think of a time when someone hurt your feelings by saying nothing or little, when you wanted to be complimented or praised? Could this possibly be included in the dynamics of this poem? Evidence?
3. Why would Catullus choose to give so terse an opinion of Caesar? (see “comparison” section for some additional information in responding to this question)

**Comparison:**

The following passage is from the Lives of Plutarch (46 – 127 AD) a Greek historian, biographer and essayist who wrote perhaps one of the most famous and influential biographies on Julius Caesar. Here he describes Caesar’s attitude toward accomplishment and receiving glory for such accomplishment. Read the passage and consider whether it can bring any light to the significance of Catullus 93. In particular, focus on the following questions: According to Plutarch, how did Caesar value the praise of others? How is this description different from the one that Catullus offers in c. 93?

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58.1 Caesar was born to do great things and to seek constantly for distinction. His many successes, so far from encouraging him to rest and to enjoy the fruits of all his labours, only served to kindle in him fresh confidence for the future, filling his mind with projects of still greater actions and with a passion for new glory, as though he had run through his stock of the old. (Rex Warner translation p. 298)

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## Catullus 52

In 55/54 the two men featured in this poem, Nonius and Publius Vatinius, allies of Julius Caesar, were placed in a high ranking office by Julius Caesar and the triumvirate. The precise identity and office of Nonius is uncertain, but we know that Publius Vatinius was given a praetorship – quite unusual if not unjust considering that the praetorship was usually reserved for former consuls, an office which Vatinius had not held by 55/54 BC. Later in 47 BC Vatinius was given a consul position, again through the orchestrations of Julius Caesar and the triumvirate. On a final note, Vatinius was hardly considered an outstanding citizen by his contemporaries, even to the extent that one famous Catullan scholar described him as “the best-hated man of his time.” (Quinn, 246) In this poem Catullus provides a response to these political events. As you read, consider the following: What is the cause behind Catullus’ anger in this poem? Does this poem contribute any additional information to the relationship between Catullus and Caesar that we learned about in c. 93?

METER: Iambic trimeter that allows for substitution in the first and third iamb

X – U – X || – U – U – U X

1 **morāris** [moror, morārī, morātus sum] to delay; put off  
**ēmori** [ēmorior, ēmorī, ēmortus sum] to die; perish

2 **sellā** [sella, -ae] chair

**curulī** [curulis, e]: to be taken as one whole with sella above; a specific chair in which only dictators, *equites*, consuls, praetors, and the curule aediles could sit. Served as a symbol of Roman civic dignity and authority.

**strūma** [struma, ae]: tumor - in apposition with Nonius. Interestingly, Vatinius was reported to have severe disfigurements growing from his face.

3 **cōsulātum** [Cōsulātus, ī] consulship; the term of office for a consul.

**per cōsulātum** by *his consulship*; when taking oaths, Romans could use *per* as a way of saying “by” as in “I swear by the gods”; See Oxford Latin Dictionary p. 1327, 10a for details.

**pēierat** [pēierō, pēierāre, pēierāvī] to commit perjury, (i.e. to promise that you are going to do something and then not follow through with your promise). It was custom that one taking office would take an oath promising to protect the state and honor the office. Metrically this word is unusual, scanning as three syllables in this pattern: – U –

1 Quid est, Catulle? Quid morāris ēmorī?

2 sellā in curulī strūma Nonius sedet,

3 per cōsulātum pēierat Vatīnius:

4 Quid est, Catulle? Quid morāris ēmorī?

### Initial Explorations:

1. How does Catullus create patterns in this poem? Do they contribute to the significance of the poem?
2. What does the word *strūma* contribute to the imagery of this poem?

### Discussion questions:

1. What is the cause behind Catullus' anger in this poem?
2. Does this poem contribute any additional information to the relationship between Catullus and Caesar?
3. Vatinius, happened to be a strong political enemy to one of Catullus' close friends, Gaius Calvus. Does this piece of information contribute to the possible significance of c. 52? How?
4. All three of these poems have shown aspects of Catullus' perspective on the political environment in which he lived. With what you have read and discussed, how would you characterize this perspective? You may find the comparison section below interesting as you respond to this question.
5. Many tend to view Catullus as a writer of love poetry. Does this poem, or for that matter any of the other poems we have read, challenge such an assessment of Catullus and his work? If so, how?

### Comparison:

Suetonius was a historian who was born in 69 AD and died sometime after 122 AD. In his *Life of Caesar* he records an encounter between Julius Caesar and Catullus which has brought much speculation, but little conclusion in determining the precise nature of the relationship between Caesar and Catullus. Read the passage below and consider what you think it says about the relationship between these well known figures of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

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§74 When Gaius Calvus, after his cruel lampoons of Caesar, made a move towards reconciliation through mutual friends, Caesar took the initiative by writing him a friendly letter. Valerius Catullus had also libeled him in his verses about Mamurra<sup>1</sup>, yet Caesar, while admitting that these were a permanent blot on his name, accepted Catullus' apology and invited him to dinner that same afternoon, and never interrupted his friendship with Catullus' father.” (Robert Graves trans. p. 34)

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<sup>1</sup> Mamurra was in many ways similar to Vatinius. He was hand picked by Caesar and Pompey for various administrative positions as the two were strengthening their grip over the Roman Republic. Mamurra was notoriously debauched and serves as the subject of some of Catullus' most sexually explicit and shocking verse. If we have time we will be reading in class one of these poems, c. 29. To illustrate just how harshly Catullus spoke about Mamurra, and by implication Caesar and Pompey, one of the common epithets that Catullus applies to Mamurra is “Mentula”, which is a slang term for a phallus.

## Catullus 29

(Introduction and commentary adapted from Daniel Garrison The Student's Catullus; translation from Charles Martin The Poems of Catullus)

Roman looting of the provinces for personal profit and the resultant displays of gross private wealth shocked even the cynical Romans. This is the first of several attacks on Caesar's protégé Mamurra and on Pompey and Caesar for harboring such a corrupt wastrel. In c. 53 above we read about Vatinius, another such person. Written soon after Caesar's invasion of Britain in 55 BC, and before the death of his daughter Julia (Pompey's wife) in 54. The meter that this poem employs had been used since early Greek times as the medium of abuse. Its rapidity gives Catullus' attack a slashing, insistent ferocity

**METER:** Iambic senarius/pure trimeter

U – U – U – U – U – U x

1 **pati** [patior, patī, pāssus sum] suffer; allow

2 **nisi** [conj] except, unless

**impudicus, a, um** [adj] licentious; sexually immoral;

**vorax, voracis** [adj] ravenous, insatiable

**aleō, aleōnis** (m) habitual gambler

3 – 4 The main verbs vidēre and patī in line 1 have launched this section of the sentence into indirect discourse. *Comata* “hairy” *Gallia* is a reference to Gaul (modern day France) where the Romans saw the inhabitants' long hair as a stereotype. Together with *ultima Britannia* these form the subject of singular verb *habēbat*

**quod** [rel pronoun] that which

**ante** [here used as adv] before

**ultimus, a, um** [adj] furthest; most distant

5 **cinaedus, ī** [noun] a vulgar term describing a man one who takes up a sexually passive role in homosexual intercourse. Martin translates this as “faggot”; to apply the term to Romulus, someone who for the Romans was a mix between George Washington and a legendary religious figure like Peter, has a particularly jarring effect.

**feres** [fr. fero, ferre, tulī, lātum] here to be taken as tolerate/bear

6 **superbus, a, um** [adj] prideful

**superfluēns** [prtcl from superfluō, -ere, -fluxī, -fluctum] overflow; be or have more than enough

QUIS hoc potest uidere, quis potest pati,

nisi impudicus et vorax et aleo,

Mamurram habere quod Comata Gallia

habebat ante et ultima Britannia?

cinaede Romule haec vidēbis et feres?

5

et ille nunc superbus et superfluēns

7 **perambulābit** [perambulō (1)] walk/strut about; here in the sense of “gets around”  
**cubilia** [cubīle, ī (n)] bed, couch

8 **albulus, a, um** [adj] little while; “little” because of diminutive suffix –ul-  
**columbus, ī** [noun] dove  
 Adoneus [proper name] Adonis was the

**Detumescent:** means “reducing in swelling or inflammation” This is Martin’s attempt to reflect the vulgarity of the actual Latin which uses diffututa, from futuō, futuere, futuī, futum which as defined in the Oxford Latin Dictionary is “to have sexual intercourse with a woman” Most editors and scholars of Catullus are not as restrained and attempt to capture the virility of Catullan invective by using the English verb “fuck”. In the context of the prefix dif- (originally dis-) this suggest something along the lines of “exhausted from sexual intercourse.”

21 **quid** [interrog. Adv.] here meaning something closer to “why” than “what”  
**malum** [fr. adj. malus, a, um] This adjective is functioning as substantive, meaning it is an adjectives which stands on its own as a noun. Thus, in translation the word would be rendered “bad man” and not simply “bad”  
**fovētis** [foveō, fovēre, fovī, fatus] favor, maintain, foster

22 **unctus, a, um** [adj] appointed; designated; literally “anointed” For the Romans, family and anything to do with its business very much existed in the realm of the sacred.

**patrimonia, ae** (f) inheritance

perambulābit omnium cubilia,

ut albulus columbus aut Adoneus?

cinaede Romule, haec vidēbis et feres?

es impudīcus et vorax et aleo.

10

*was it on his account, O my peerless leader  
 That you set out to make war on distant Britain?  
 --so that this detumescent dick on your payroll  
 Could waste another twenty of thirty million?  
 If that isn't a lefthanded handout, what is?  
 Is there no end at all to his plowing and swilling?  
 After he spent the money left by his father,  
 He went through the loot from your campaign in Pontus,  
 And then the gold won on your Spanish adventure:  
 Now we must fear the same fate for Gaul and Britain!*

quid hunc malum fovetis? aut quid hic potest

nisi uncta devorare patrimonia?

23 **eone nomine** Abl. of means. Using *is, ea, id* to modify *nōmine* (i.e. Mamurra's name) makes it more emphatic "...by *that* name"

**piissimī** [superlative adj of *pius, a, um*] dutiful; modifying *socer generque* but is also to be taken with *urbis* "most dutiful in the city"

24 **socer, socerī** (m) father-in-law; a reference to Caesar, technically Pompey's father-in-law, although much younger than Pompey

**gener, generī** (m) son-in-law; reference to Pompey

**perdidistis** [*perdo, perdere, perdidī, perdītum*] destroy

eone nōmine urbis piissimī

socer generque, perdidistis omnia?

24

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