

New translations from the Latin: Catullus and Martial NTM 2016

In this installment, we're excited to share the new translations from the Latin of two poems by Catullus, translated by Richard Green, and a series of epigrams by Martial translated by George Held. We hope you'll appreciate the trip to ancient times, the authors' daring language, as well as their witty English renditions.

And remember, in September and beyond, to read and share with your friends your favorite literary translations, celebrating the world's heritage in one breath. We hope our month-long translation feat inspires and delights you.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

Catullus (c. 84 – 54 BC)



The author of these poems, **Gaius Valerius Catullus**, known as **Catullus**, was a shortlived, ca. 84-54 BC, but influential Latin poet of the late Roman Republic. Among those he influenced were Ovid, Horace, and Virgil, and he has been admired by many poets in modern times.

He came from a prominent family in what is now northern Italy and spent most of his time as a young adult in Rome where he socialized principally with other poets, although, according to one story, Caesar, whom he lampooned in various poems, invited him to dinner when he apologized, a sign of Catullus's prestige.

His association with other poets was of a piece with his lifestyle, which rejected the political and military activities commonly engaged in by privileged Romans in favor of poetry and love.

He belonged to a “neoteric” (new) school of poetry, which eschewed epic themes dealing with heroes and gods in favor of small scale personal ones. Together, his poems paint a broad picture of Roman life in his social set. His works include: poems to and about his friends; erotic poems, notably those about his great love “Lesbia”; invectives against notable politicians such as Caesar, Pompey, and Cicero and friends and lovers whom he considered to have betrayed him; and condolences. The wide range of Catullus's poems is illustrated in those chosen for this translation.

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I regularly translate poems I read in foreign languages, for two reasons: first, because you can't rely on translations to reflect the mind of the poet rather than that of the translator. My favorite example of that is a translation of “pissen”, German for “piss”, in a poem by Brecht, as “micturate”. (The culprit was Michael Hoffman no less.)

The second reason I translate is because it helps me understand and appreciate the poem. It makes possible, indeed forces, close reading to a degree that's difficult in a language in which one doesn't have native fluency.

A special reason for translating Latin poems is that so many translations are by Latin scholars rather than poets and are, well, scholarly, rather than poetic. I believe in sticking as close to the original as possible, but I want the translation to approximate the music and tone of the original, insofar as that's consistent with accuracy.

The challenge of both these poems is that Latin words have very different sets of definitions and connotations from their English equivalents. Those differences exist in all languages, but are more pronounced with Latin than with Romance or Germanic languages in that Latin evolved over two millennia ago in a culture that, for all it's similarities to ours was very different.

Catullus VIII presented a particular problem. The original is playful, but its playfulness is lost in straightforward translation, due to those pesky connotations. To reproduce the poem's playfulness, I felt I had to depart from the original more than I normally like to and, indeed, introduce anachronisms. In effect this is an adaptation rather than a translation, a distinction that's too often blurred.

And, speaking of translations that don't reflect the original, a famous translation by Aubrey Beardsley of “Hail and Farewell” is rhymed, although the original wasn't, nor was any classical Latin poetry of which I'm aware. The rhyme, for me, diminishes the solemnity of the poem.

— *Richard Greene, translator*

Catullus, *Carmina* Poem 8

Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire,
et quod vides perisse perditum ducas.
fulsere quondam candidi tibi soles,
cum ventitabas quo puella ducebat
amata nobis quantum amabitur nulla.
ibi illa multa tum iocosa fiebant,
quae tu volebas nec puella nolebat.
fulsere vere candidi tibi soles.
nunc iam illa non vult: tu quoque, impotens, noli,
nec quae fugit sectare, nec miser vive,
sed obstinata mente perfer, obdura.
vale, puella! iam Catullus obdurat,
nec te requiret nec rogabit invitam:
at tu dolebis, cum rogaberis nulla.
scelestas, vae te! quae tibi manet vita!
quis nunc te adibit? cui videberis bella?
quem nunc amabis? cuius esse diceris?
quem basiabis? cui labella mordebis?
at tu, Catulle, destinatus obdura.

Wretched Catullus, may you cease playing the fool,
and recognize that what once was is no more.
Once the sun shone for you
when you with your mistress rendezvoused.
Such love you'll never see again.
You made merry as you would
and she too not unwillingly.
Truly the sun shone for you.
Now that she spurns you,
you (though besotted still) should spurn her too.
Don't run after her, nor let misery get the better of you.
Be firm.

Farewell, mistress. Catullus is determined.
He won't pine for you.
He won't come knocking at your door.
You will suffer when no one wants you anymore.
Woe to you wicked girl!
What life is left for you?
Who will visit you?
Who will exclaim over your looks?
Who will pamper you with love?
With whom will you be paired?
On whom will you lavish your kisses?
Whose lips will you nibble now?
But you, Catullus, be firm.

Catullus 101 (*Ave Atque Vale*)

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus
Advenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias,

Ut te postremo donarem munere mortis
Et mutam nequiquam adloquerer cinerem,

Quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum,
Heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi!

Nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum
Tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,

Accipe frataerno multum manantia fletu
Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale

Through many lands and over many seas
I come, brother, to this sad ceremony,

to confer on thee this final service to the dead,
and address in vain your mute ashes.

Since fate has taken thee from me,
Oh, brother, torn away too soon,

I give thee these last offerings,
blessed by the tradition of our fathers.

Accept them, though sodden with fraternal tears,
and, for eternity, brother, hail and farewell.

About the translator



Richard Greene, born in 1931, began writing poetry in the 8th grade and continued through college where he studied with Henry Rago, then editor of *Poetry* magazine. He wrote little poetry after college, during law school, military service and a 38 year career in international development, but began writing, and reading, poetry again intensively after retiring. At that point, the working knowledge of French and Spanish he'd acquired in his international development career and of German acquired during military service helped him understand and appreciate poetry in those languages and led him to translate them to deepen his understanding. At the same time he picked up again on his high school Latin, with the idea of going back to the deep roots of contemporary western poetry.

Martial (A.D. 40-104)



Marcus Valerius Martialis, known in English as Martial, was born in Spain and flourished in Rome. His greatest achievement remains his 1,500 epigrams, in which he depicts, often satirically, the behavior of his fellow Romans and perfects the form in Latin. His influence appears in the work of virtually every succeeding epigram writer.

XII.73

You tell me, Catullus, I am your heir.
I won't believe it until I read it.



Heredem tibi me, Catulle, dicis.
non credo nisi legero, Catulle.

XII.59

Roma gives you loads of kisses
now you're back after fifteen years,
more than Lesbia gave Catullus.
All of the neighborhood greets you:
the hairy farmer goatishly kisses you;
on one side the weaver presses on you,
on the other side presses the fuller,

then the shoemaker just having kissed leather,
the owner of the perilous chin,
the man with the lame right leg, the bleary one,
the fellator, and the lapper fresh from his cunt.
It sure wasn't worth it for you to have come home.



Tantum dat tibi Roma basiorum
post annos modo quindecim reverso
quantum Lesbia non dedit Catullo.
te vicinia tota, te pilosus
hircoso premit osculo colonus;
hinc instat tibi textor, inde fullo,
hinc sutor modo pelle basiata,
hinc menti dominus periculosi,
hinc dexiocholus, inde lippus
fellatorque recensque cunnilingus.
iam tanti tibi non fuit redire.

XI.89

Why do you send me, Polla, virgin garlands?
I prefer to hold roses you have rolled in.



Intactas quare mittis mihi, Polla, coronas?
a te vexatas malo tenere rosas.

XI.87

Once you were rich, but you then were a bugger,
and for a long time no woman was known to you.
Now you chase old women. Oh, who knows what poverty will do!
It has made you, Charidemus, a fucker.



Dives eras quondam: sed tunc pedico fuisti
et tibi nulla diu femina nota fuit.
nunc sectaris anus. o quantum cogit egestas!
illa fututorem te, Charideme, facit.

XI.78

Practice embracing a woman, practice, Victor,
and let your cock learn unknown work.
The bridal veils are being woven, your virgin is almost prepared;
soon the new bride will be cropping your boys.
She will first let her lustful groom bugger her,
while she fears the first wound of the new shaft,
but her nurse and her mother will forbid it from happening often
and will say, "She's your wife, not your boy."
Oh, how much grief, how much distress you'll suffer
If a cunt is a stranger to you!
So hand yourself over as a tyro to a Saburan instructress.
She'll make a man out of you. A virgin doesn't teach well.



Utere femineis complexibus, utere, Victor,
ignotumque sibi mentula discat opus.
flammea texuntur sponsae, iam virgo paratur,
tondebit pueros iam nova nupta tuos.
pedicare semel cupido dabit illa marito,
dum metuit teli vulnera prima novi:
saepius hoc fieri nutrix materque vetabunt
et dicent: 'uxor, non puer, ista tibi est.'
heu quantos aestus, quantos patiere labores,
si fuerit cunnus res peregrina tibi!
ergo Suburanae tironem trade magistrae.
illa virum faciet; non bene virgo docet.

About the translator



George Held's translations of Martial's epigrams have appeared in *National Translation Month*, *Circumference*, *Ezra*, *Transference*, and *Natural Bridge*, among other journals. His twenty-first collection of poems is *Bleak Splendor* (Muddy River Books, 2016).