

QUEER CATULLUS, CATULLAN QUEERS

the power of trans narratives in postmodern Classics

Abstract

As several classicists have pointed out in the recent past, Classics, as it has been and still is being practiced, is inherently exclusive. Critical approaches to the future of the discipline reconstruct the narrativisation of history by re-distributing the power over who gets to tell it. Following this attempt to disrupt the power dynamics that shape the way history is told, this project focuses on the ancient Roman poet Catullus whose poetry has infamously been provocative, censored, and politicised. By applying the term 'queer' as a politically charged term for LGBTQIA+ identities to the history of the persona Catullus, this project treats Catullus as an inherently disruptive and subversive force in the history of Classical scholarship. The goal of this project is to employ interdisciplinary and accessible approaches to the poetry of Catullus in order to include polyphonic narratives in the reformulation of an inclusive discipline of Classics.

Catullus' poems were not introduced to an English-speaking audience until John Nott's translation in 1775. Over the past 250 years opinions and interpretations greatly diverged into **polar opposites** that gave birth to a whole range of interpretations beyond the historical existence of the Roman poet of the 1st century BCE. All these 'superimpositions of one paradigmatic grid over another' added to the **persona of Catullus** as whom he is known today.

Catullus – a history of Classics

18th and 19th century 'the infamous perversions of Catullus'

Strict **censorship** became intrinsic to Catullus' poems. Even nowadays, many poems are still considered too inappropriate to be taught in secondary and higher education due to their **explicit violence** and **sexual content** . For this reason, the publication of unrestricted translation of the poems could have had severe consequences for translators and publishers.

Simultaneously, public and academic interest in sexualities that did not conform to heteronormative expectations grew increasingly over the 19th century. While contemporary classicists heatedly discussed whether the ancient Greeks were morally superior to the ancient Romans, 'the infamous perversions of Catullus' became a crucial point that linked both these debates; the explicit details of sexual relationships of the poetic persona with both men and women served as examples to highlight the supposed **moral degeneracy of the Romans** . These two developments made Catullus a paradigm for **stigmatisations of gay men** as scandalous, promiscuous, and morally inferior.

*'somehow the very study of Catullus' poetry 'outs' readers' [and translators] own attitudes towards sexuality.'*²

At the same time, homosexual and bisexual men were increasingly interested in Catullus' open explorations of romantic and sexual relationships with other men (mostly his lover Juventius).

John Addington Symonds writes about Catullus:

*'[he] endowed with keener sensibilities, with a sensuality more noble because of its intensity, with emotions more profound, with a deeper faculty of thought, that... simply and exquisitely apprehends the facts of human life.'*³

Symonds and Saul prove that Catullus' poems offer a literary entrance to this imagined, eden-like Rome of acceptance – an escape-driven **nostalgia** for a future of **acceptance** that was lost in the past.

Jack Saul writes:

*'In those days [of ancient Rome] men loved a lusty fellow as much as women do now, and the lusty fellow could give as much pleasure to a man as he could to a woman, and be thought none the worse for it.'*⁴

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A Queer Catullus?

A queer Catullus does not only represent LGBTQIA+ identities. A queer Catullus embodies all the **socio-political, disruptive aspects** inherent to the term queer and deviates from (constructed) narratives of normativity. A queer Catullus enjoys sexual relationships with all genders and pushes the boundaries of **constructions of gender** ; he appropriates, reclaims and celebrates them indiscreetly, ironically, and unapologetically. A queer Catullus is a **trans** Catullus – trans in the sense of not performing gender expectations that correspond to the sex assigned at birth.

WHY QUEER

*Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world... QUEER... is a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him'*¹

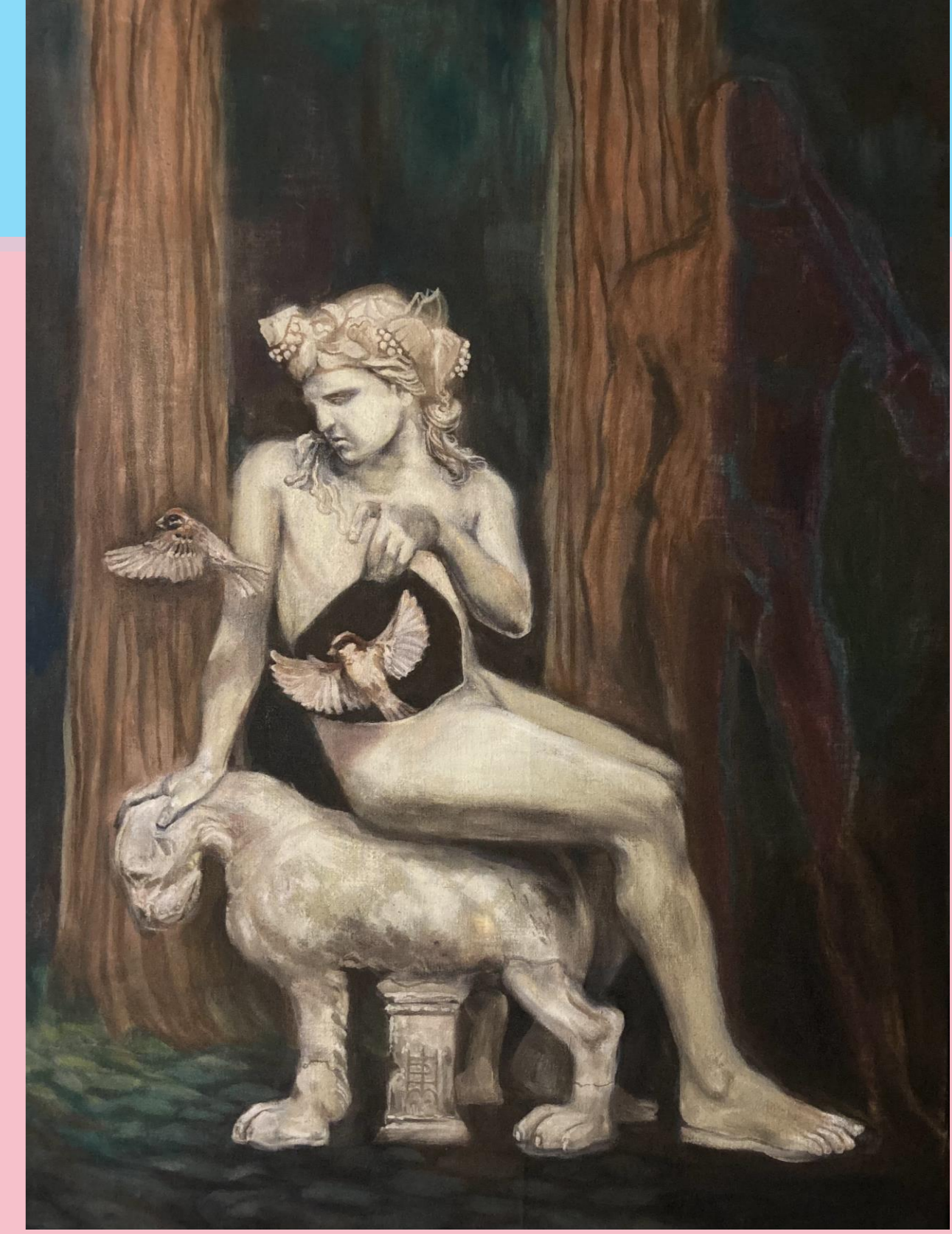


Image 1: Blue Smiley, 2021, Aves Graves, accessed August 17, 2021, <https://catullan-identities.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2021/08/04/aves-graves-by-blue-smiley/>

The 20th century – postmodern configurations

*the system of sexuality and gender 'corresponded to social patterns of dominance and submission, reproducing power differentials between partners in configuring gender roles and assigning them by criteria not always coterminous with biological sex.'*⁵

During an increasing academic interest in gender and sexuality during the 20th century, Catullus became an invaluable asset in the study of sexuality and gender in ancient Roman society specifically *due to* the poems' explicit content. The postmodern Classicists repositioned the system of sexuality and gender in Catullus' poetry as specific (social) constructions within a network of power dynamics. The historical baggage of censorship and political importance are part of what Catullus means and therefore still is today; dismissing them as 'misprisions' would not prove helpful. Instead, the nasty, the romantic, the genius, and the political are intrinsic parts of the horizontal and vertical process of both researching the historical Catullus and building the persona Catullus.

the quest for the Catullesque

Bricollaging Catullus

David Wray uses the term 'bricoleur' to describe Catullus – a term that rejects narratorial authority, and puts emphasis on polyphonic narratives and equal power balances in the construction of narratives. 'Catullus' is not the person writing but the compiler arranging the poems. This puts emphasis on the conversations, dynamics, and relationships expressed through the prism of the oeuvre.⁶

Catullan Provocations

William Fitzgerald's *Catullan Provocations* concludes that these interrelationships and performances are intrinsically provocative. Fitzgerald is interested in the catullesque – the disruptive power of juxtapositions and parallels, the symphonies and kakophonies of voices, and the disjunction between what-is-being-said and what-is-being-performed.⁷

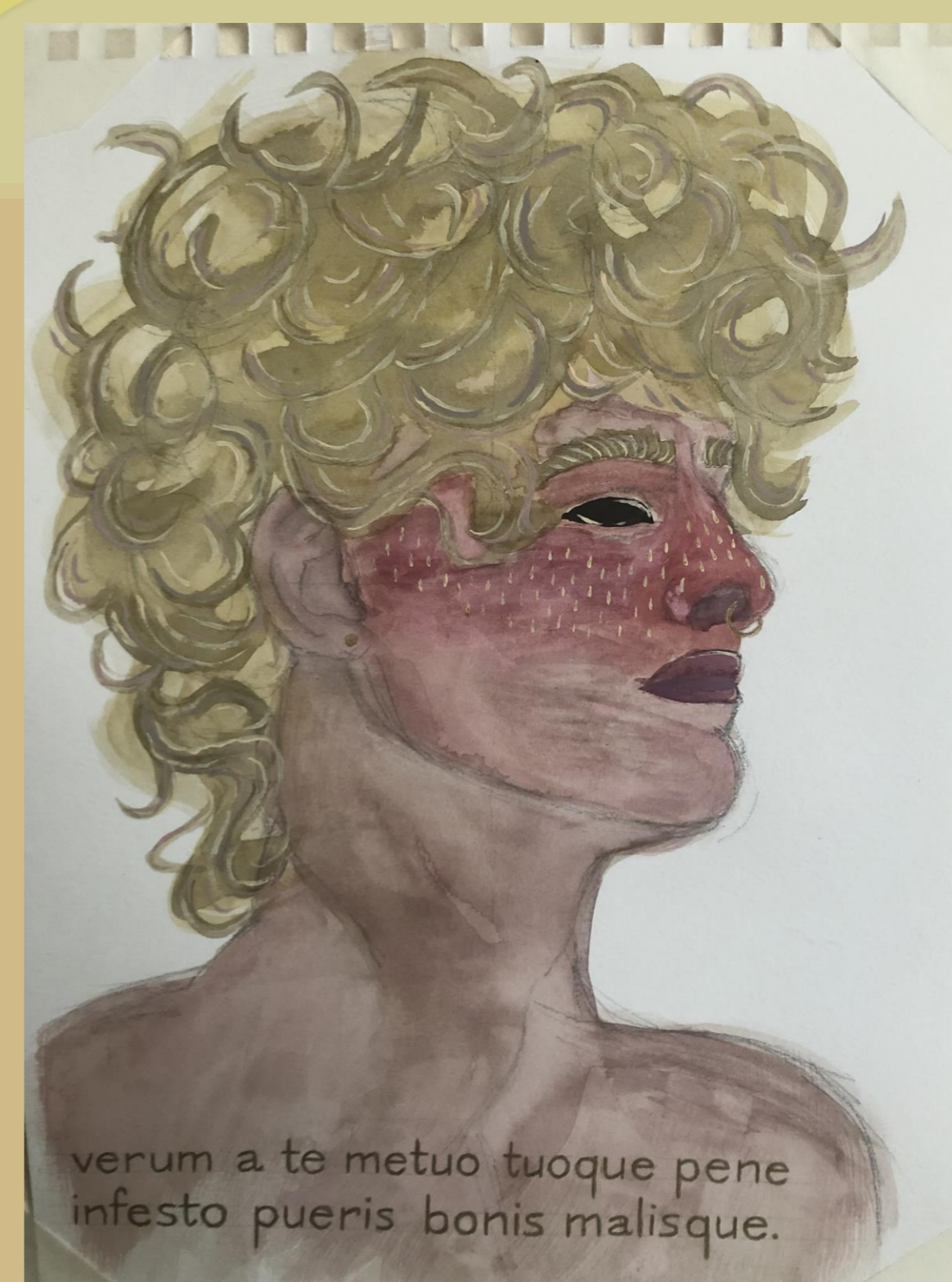


Image 2: Wilde Smith, 2021, response to Poem 15, accessed August 17, 2021, <https://catullan-identities.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2021/07/29/response-to-poem-15/>

Classics Redefined – Catullan Identities project



In the attempt to move away from the historically constructed Catullus, I created the open, collaborative art project Catullan Identities. The goal of the project is to visualise characters and relationships from a selection of Catullus' poems.

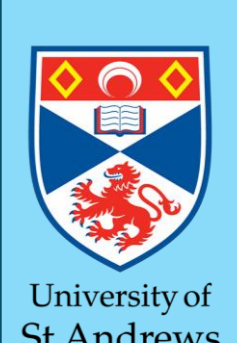
The submissions turned out to be illustrations, poems, and combinations thereof. Most of them address the relationship between identity and body by playing with expectations on how gendered bodies are supposed to perform and look like. Notions of belonging, safety, and home recur in different ways, while the amount of characters ranges from one up to five people per poem. Three submissions are displayed on this poster.

The project is supposed to encourage safe spaces for genderqueer identities within Classical scholarship around Catullus. The history of Catullan scholarship was significantly influenced by queer identities; this must be acknowledged in future research. By making this research accessible to a wide range of (queer) readers, I hope to emphasise the need for safe spaces for genderqueer identities to explore their queerness creatively and further illustrate the importance of an inclusive, accessible discipline of Classics.

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Image 3: Zofia Guertin, 2021, They are Attis, Beloved of Cybele, accessed August 17, 2021, <https://catullan-identities.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2021/07/14/they-are-attis-beloved-of-cybele/>