QUEER CATULLUS, CATULLAN QUEERS

the power of trans narratives in postmodern Classics

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Funded by the Laidlaw Foundation

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for their constant support throughout the six weeks of my research. I am deeply indebted to the Laidlaw community that helped me conduct my research and focus on my project goals. I also wish to extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Dr Henry Stead for his invaluable support and advice throughout the Laidlaw Programme, and whose encouragement and belief in me helped turn a small idea into this amazing project. I also wish to express my deepest appreciation for all the submissions to the *Catullan Identities* project – this catullesque, queer project would not have been possible without them.

Introduction

In February 2021 Mathura Umachandran introduced the conference 'Queer and the Classical: Critical Futures, Critical Feelings' with her talk 'Carrier Bag Theory of Queer Feeling, or, Coming to Critique' in which she argued that interdisciplinary, deconstructive approaches are crucial for the necessary process of reformulating the discipline of Classical Studies/Classics in a postmodern world. Drawing from Ursula K. LeGuin's support for multidirectional, polyphonic narratives, she advocated for a discipline that consciously disconnects itself from the hegemonic power structures that created and practiced it historically and that thereby perpetuated the historical exclusion of marginalised identities through a herocentric and patriarchal narrativisation of history. As several classicists have pointed out in the recent past, Classics, as it has been and still is being practiced, is inherently exclusive.[1] The critical futures that Umachandran visualised do not revise or re-narrativise history, but instead 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 been infamously provocative, censured, and politicised. By using the term 'queer' as a politically charged term for LGBTQIA+ identities in the examination of the history of Catullan scholarship, this project treats Catullus as an inherently disruptive and subversive force in the history of Classical scholarship. I will firstly elaborate on the term queer, I will then give a brief overview of Catullan scholarship, and finally I will propose an approach to practicing Classics inclusively. The goal of this project is to prove the significance of queer approaches to Catullus in the reformulation of an inclusive discipline of Classics.

Queer Classics – reconciling an oxymoron?

A queer Catullus does not only describe 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 leaflet 'published anonymously by Queers' and distributed at the 1990 Pride in New York City illustrates these aspects of the term 'queer' in a very Catullan (that is provocative) way:

> '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

[1] Poser, Rachel. "He Wants to Save Classics from Whiteness. Can the Field Survive?" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, February 2, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/02/magazine/classics-greece-rome-whiteness.html

> sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him.'[2]

The rejection of discretion and embrace of visibility as a means to disrupt (hetero/cis-normative) narratives is the goal achieved with the 'sly and ironic weapon', a rhetorical device that is prevalent throughout Catullus' poetry.

A queer Catullus enjoys sexual relationships with all genders and, most importantly, 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.

However, gender and sex are words and constructions of the 20th century. The danger of revising history by projecting social constructions anachronistically onto different socio-cultural contexts is an argument that has often been used against attempts to understand sexuality and gender in ancient cultures. Revising or editing the perception of the historical Catullus is not the goal of this project. By examining the history of Catullus reception, I aim to extract dynamics from his poetry that captured or inspired queerness in order to kindle these sparks for a postmodern, contemporary audience.

Catullus – a history of Classics

'the infamous perversions of Catullus'

The reconstruction of the historical person Catullus is a much disputed, yet very tempting enterprise that brought forth a heavy history of scholarship. Tempting is the detailed nature of his oeuvre that blurrs the boundaries between autobiographical, autofictional, and fictional elements beyond recognition and that has invited scholars to deduce all kinds of information about the historical Catullus. I will only briefly outline what is confirmed about the historical Catullus and then elaborate on this heavy history that gave birth to the persona of Catullus.

Catullus was a poet who lived during the turmoils of the Roman civil war in the 1st century BCE. Most of his elegiac poetry is concerned with the poetic persona's relationships to the lovers Lesbia and Juventius. Lesbia is most certainly a literary pseudonym and has been traced back to Clodia Metella, a contemporary of the historical Catullus.

John Nott's 1795 translation of Catullus' poems did not only introduce Catullus to an English-speaking audience but also set the tone for a long history of strict censorship that sanitized

[2] anonymous author. Queer resources directory. Accessed August 17, 2021. http://www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this

the poems' descriptions of sexual and romantic relationships with male and female partners.[3] Ralph J. Hexter points out that publishing a translation of Catullus' poems was highly politicised and potentially harmful for translators as accurate translations of explicit content often led to assumptions about the translator's own sexuality. He writes:

> 'Just as Catullus himself seems to have provoked and anticipated the dialogism of response to his sexual personae, above all in Poem 16, so, across the history of reception and scholarship, somehow the very study of Catullus' poetry 'outs' readers' own attitudes towards sexuality'[4].

While the Victorian public was carefully "protected" from the supposedly harmful parts of Catullus' poetry, poems such as 16 became increasingly important in debates about homosexuality. The 19th century's increasing interest in non-normative sexualities turned its gaze towards historical examples and literary reflections of sexual activities between men, and found plenty of evidence in ancient Roman and Greek texts. However, as Jennifer Ingleheart points out, this interest 'must also be viewed in the wider context of the nineteenth-century British philhellenic discourse, for there was a decisive break with Rome as a model for British society after the French revolution…, and Rome quickly became 'other', while classical Greece was put on a pedestal'[5]. This 'anti-Roman, pro-Greek stance'[6] is greatly illustrated in Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1818 essay *A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love* (not published until 1931):

> 'The ideas suggested by Catullus, Martial, Juvenal and Suetonius never occur among the Greeks… The Romans were brutally obscene; the Greeks seemed hardly capable of obscenity in a strict sense. How innocent is even the Lysistrata of Aristophanes compared with the infamous perversions of Catullus!'[7]

Ingleheart concludes that Shelley's view of Catullus' poems as 'images of pain and horror'[8] 'reflect a view of sodomy as a violent, repulsive act incompatible with love'[9]. Even and maybe especially during an increasing (academic and public) interest in the origins of homosexuality, Catullus' poems were still too provocative.

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[3] Hexter, Ralph J. "The Kisses of Juventius, and Policing the Boundaries of Masculinity". in *Ancient Rome and the Construction of Modern Homosexual Identities*, edited by Jennifer Ingleheart, Oxford Scholarship Online: 2015, 277

[4] Ibid., 287

[5] Ingleheart, Jennifer. "Introduction: Romosexuality". in *Ancient Rome and the Construction of Modern Homosexual Identities*, edited by Jennifer Ingleheart, Oxford Scholarship Online: 2015, 17

[6] Ibid., 17

[7] Notopoulos, J. A. *The Platonism of Shelley: A Study of Platonism and the Poetic Mind*. New York, NY: Octagon, 1949, 412

[8] Ibid., 411

[9] Ingleheart, "Introduction: Romosexuality", 18

Catullus and queer nostalgia

John Addington Symonds, an iconic advocate for acceptance of homosexual love (among men), greatly admired Wharton's translation of Sappho:

> 'In Sappho and Catullus ... we meet with richer and more ardent natures [than those of Horace and Alcaeus]: they are 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.'[10]

Symonds' love for Sappho's and Catullus' 'sensibilities' could not contradict Shelley's 'infamous perversions of Catullus' any more strongly. His emphasis on Catullus' and Sappho's profundity and depth suggests that some members of the Victorian society did read – and appreciate – Catullus' *unsanitized* oeuvre.

Homosexual desire as a 'fact of human life' is further explored in *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain; or, The Recollections of a Mary-Ann, with Short Essays on Sodomy and Tribadism*, an account of the life of a male prostitute published privately in 1881 under the pseudonym Jack Saul. Although the accuracy and origin of the text are still disputed, the text offers invaluable insight into homosexual sub-cultures in the 19th century. Unlike Shelley, Saul yearns for the Roman attitude towards homosexual activities:

> '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.[11]

Catullus is mentioned among a series of Roman emperors who were involved in homosexual relationships. Saul aims to normalise homosexual desire as a phenomenon occuring across time and cultures. Both Symonds and Saul suggest 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.

These conflicting attitudes towards Catullus only added to the weight of his iconically dense and ambivalent oeuvre. The poems seem to fit into any context – academic dispute about Roman morality or the beginnings of gay rights activism in Victorian England. Although (Romantic) autobiographical approaches to Catullus' poems have largely been rejected throughout postmodern scholarship a century later, these polarized opinions prove that *all* of Catullus' poems were in fact more widely read than the sanitised translations of this time

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[10] Wharton, Henry Thornton. *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation*. London: John Lane, 1895 (third edition), 33-4

[11] Saul, Jack. *Sins of the Cities of the Plain or the Recollections of a Mary-Ann with Short Essays on Sodomy and Tribadism*. Valancourt Classics: 2017, 84

would suggest. Literary cross-references to Catullus' poems and the political precariousness attached to engagement with Catullus' poems make it intriguingly difficult to categorise Catullus as merely of scholarly interest. The queer in Catullus' poetry is thus not only the explicit description of gay love but the sexual, the proud, the charged.

'new critical misprisions', or the quest for the catullesque

With growing academic interest in gender and sexuality during the 20th century, Catullus became invaluable in the study of sexuality and gender in ancient Roman society specifically *due to* the poems' explicit content. The postmodern Classicists repositioned sexuality and gender in Catullus' poetry in a Foucauldian manner as specific (social) constructions within a network of power dynamics. Skinner writes:

> 'Its (the Roman sex/gender system's) conceptual blueprint of sexual relations… 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.'[12]

Unlike the Romantics, postmodern Catullus scholars rejected genius configurations of Catullus and aimed to contextualise sexual activities, relationships, and violence in Catullus' poems in these 'social patterns of dominance and submission' produced by the contemporary political situation[13]. The poems were not an outburst of emotion or an autobiographical reflection but key to understanding semantic intersections of class, race, and gender through Catullus' poems.[14] Whilst deconstructing the definition of gender and sexuality through this lens, Catullus' poems were still treated as historical documents, and their meaning is inextricably connected to their contemporary context of origin.

While criticially reflecting on these different approaches to Catullus, David Wray concludes that any attempt to capture 'ancient texts "as they really are" will consequently either introduce new critical misprisions or, more likely, recapitulate old ones.'[15] This vicious circle however, is inherent to the study of all texts, specifically that of ancient texts, considering the multitude of approaches (or 'critical misprisions') that a long history of scholarship naturally brings forth. 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

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[12] Skinner, Marilyn B. "Introduction: Quod multofit aliter in Graecia...". in *Roman Sexualities*, edited by Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner, 1-28, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press (2021), 3

[13] Quinn, Skinner, and Wyke

[14] Quinn, Walters, and Wyke

[15] Wray, David. *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood*. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press: 2001, 36

helpful. Instead, 'the passing from one set of critical preconceptions to another, the superimposing of one paradigmatic grid over another'[16] are what blend the historical Catullus, the poems, and the study of Catullus into one.

Wray further uses the term 'bricoleur' to describe Catullus – a term that is often used in (postmodern) multidirectional approaches to understanding narratives. The term further rejects narratorial authority, and puts emphasis on polyphonic narratives and equal power balances in the construction of narratives.[17] 'Catullus' is not the person writing but the compiler arranging the poems. The persona 'Catullus' becomes the adjective 'catullan' that describes the conversations, dynamics, and relationships expressed through the prism of the oeuvre. This approach offers a way to understand all these conflicting aspects about Catullus as part of the polyphony and richness of his poems.

Whereas Wray equates a postmodern Catullus and a premodern Catullus, William Fitzgerald's *Catullan Provocations* offers a very interesting approach to analysing the relationships between these voices. As the title suggests, their ironic interrelationships and performances are intrinsically *provocative*.[18] While he does not treat the poems as a hermetically secluded space, separated from their contemporary context, Fitzgerald is interested in the *catullesque* – the disruptive power of juxtapositions and parellels, the symphonies and kakophonies of voices, and the conflict between what-is-being-said and what-is-being-performed. In the attempt to move away from the historically constructed Catullus, I take Fitzgerald's approach as an inspiration for my project *Catullan Identities* which I propose as a way to invite more narratives – more polyphony – into Catullan scholarship and, ultimately, to make the discipline of Classics a more accessible, interdisciplinary, and inclusive discipline.

This approach further opens the door to understanding the queer in Catullus' poems as trespassing *any* normative boundaries – not only heterosexual constructions but also cis-gender narratives.

Catullan Identities – Classics redefined

Catullan Identities is a collaborative art project; no background knowledge about Classics in general or Catullus specifically are required. The goal is to visualise characters and

[16] Ibid., 36

[17] Bakhtin's highly influential essay on literary polyphony: Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Dostoevsky's Polyphonic Novel and Its Treatment in Critical Literature". in *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, 5-46, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984

[18] Fitzgerald, William. *Catullan Provocations: Lyric Poetry and the Drama of Position*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995

relationships from a selection of Catullus' poems. This selection consists of the poems 15, 16, 5, 48, and 63; they represent three different aspects of Catullus' poems that I wanted to focus on. Poems 15 and 16 embody the violence and harshness of Catullus' poetry, whereas poems 5 and 48 are often cited as the most romantic and emotional poems.They further address the two lovers Lesbia and Juventius, and are therefore a significant part of Catullus' oeuvre. For reasons of brevity, I will focus on poem 63.

Poem 63 tells the story of Attis, an Athenian youth who joins the cult of the goddess Cybele. Part of the initiation ritual is castration which Attis dutifully performs on themself. I use they/them pronouns for Attis because, strikingly, the Latin switches back and forth between masculine, feminine and gender-neutral endings when describing Attis throughout the poem – a grammatical phenomenon that makes the poem famously difficult to translate.

The submissions for this poem are illustrations, poems, and combinations thereof. Most of them address the relationship between identity and body by playing with normative expectations on how gendered bodies are supposed to perform and look like. Belonging, safety, and home are further recurring themes.

Image 1: 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/

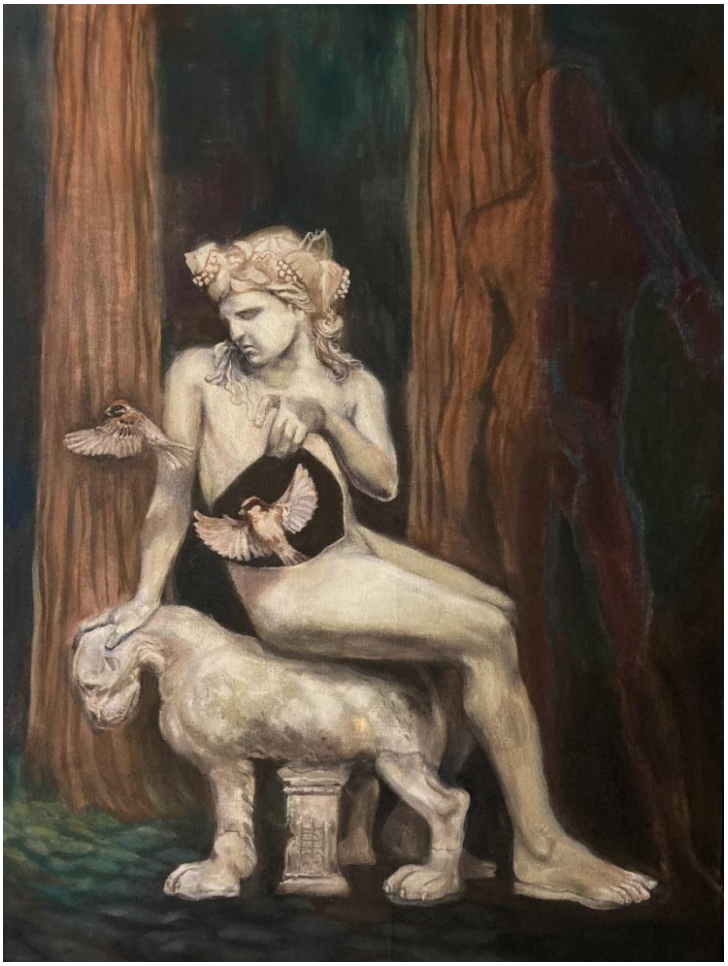

Image 2: Blue Smiley, 2021, *Aves Graves*, accessed August 17, 2021, https://catullan-identities.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2021/08/04/aves-graves-by-blue-smiley/

While similar topics are addressed, the artworks engage with their spectator/reader differently. Image 1 shows all three characters and the lions as directly addressing the spectator; the three characters in the middle seem to invite the spectator playfully. Similarly, another image recreates an atmosphere of polyphony channelled into one person, while the accompanying poem is framed as an internal conversation between Attis and a ‘you’. Both playfully tear down the fourth wall and perform consciously for an audience. Image 2 on the other hand shows a statue/person turning halfway around, seemingly unaware of a spectator. However, the gaping black hole in the person’s stomach seems to invite the spectator to crawl into the hole and to look for more birds (or organs?). By juxtaposing the marble-like surface of both the person and the birds against their apparent motion, the image plays with body horror and classicistic aesthetic. It is easy to imagine the three people and the two lions say ‘using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world’, while the black hole is the ‘sly and ironic weapon’ that exposes the often voyeuristic, exploitative gaze on (gender-)queer bodies by imposing cis-normative expectations onto them.

The poem ‘mollitia – a response to poem 16’ interestingly uses contemporary references:

> ‘The mirror is cracked in one corner.
> Fucking student landlords – what can I say?
> What’s the point of trying to fight them?
> There aren’t any properties better
> on the market.’

Similarly contemporary is Roz Kaveney’s 2018 translation of poem 51:

> ‘Looked on the Heath, and round the Dilly.
> More, checked Foyles, St Pauls, even Hampton Court Maze.’[19]

And even more so, Isobel William’s 2021 translation re-imagines Catullus’ poetry in a context of Shibari, Japanese rope fetish, as the final lines of poem 63 show:

> ‘Goddess mother, supervisor, bitch –
> Keep me free from all this lunacy, Mistress.
> Let the other overdose and switch.
> What I mean is, can I call you Mummi?
> She called me Darling.’[20]

All these different contextualisations highlight different aspects of the poems. They play with performance, expectations, suspensions (both literally and metaphorically), gender, and identity; they play with each other, appreciate each other. Queer in these adaptations is not limited to sexual identity. Queer gender identities play a major role in the artworks and translations, and suggest that the performative, disruptive, and playful of Catullan poems, that they pick up on, is what make them catullesque – and why the catullesque is so fruitful for queer approaches within Classics throughout all time.

Conclusion: Queer Catullus, Catullan Queers

This project initially set out as an exploration of drag-elements in Catullus’ poetry. Eventually, I found myself searching for what Catullus means to queer readers – what the catullesque means – in the history of Catullan scholarship. For reasons of brevity, I could not include all submissions of the project in this paper, let alone my research on camp aesthetic. However, the positive resonance I received after launching *Catullan Identities* and the effort that was put into creating the illustrations and poems prove how much potential these poems still have after centuries of interpretations and approaches. They grant a safe space for creativity,

[19] Kaveney, Roz. *Catullus*. Bristol: Sad Press, 2018, 53
[20] Williams, Isobel. *Catullus: Shibari Carmina*. Exeter: Carcanet, 2021, 56

performance, and identities; they spark joy. They disrupt normative narratives, and they empower.

What I gather from my research is that Catullus always fits because he (they?) never fits. Not because the poetry is a blank page but because it is a prism of narratives and identities. By compiling visualisations of them, I hope to encourage more accessible and diverse approaches to help re-distribute space and power for marginalised identities in the process of re-defining Classics. What Classics needs is a bit more catullesque spice.

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anonymous author. Queer resources directory. Accessed August 17, 2021. http://www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this

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