

Catallus

Caius Valerius Catullus was perhaps Rome's greatest lyric poet. He was born in Verona, in the north of Italy, around 84 BC but seems to have spent most of his short life in Rome. The period 84 to 54 BC when Catullus was living, was one of the most troubled and violent periods in the history of Republican Rome. **In** fact, the Republic fell soon after his death. Catullus came from an important family in his northern Italian homeland and he knew many of the principal political personalities of the period. He wrote poems addressed both to Caesar and to Cicero.

But Catullus did not particularly care about party politics. His passionate interests were his own personality, people as individuals, the manners and customs of the Romans and the art of poetry. As a result, his 116 surviving poems are a vital record of many aspects of ordinary daily life in ancient Rome during one of the most critical periods of Roman and European history.

Catullus appeals very strongly to us today for many reasons: he endured a very trying love affair and describes vividly every major phase in it; he was utterly devoted to family and friends but relentless in his contempt for his enemies; he is totally frank in the expression of his feelings; his wit is elegant and strikes us as being very modern; finally he died at a tragically early age, probably in 54 BC, when he was only 30 years old.

The major poems of Catullus deal with such themes as love, friendship, personal enemies, marriage (though he may not have married) and the death of a beloved brother. Their mood can vary from lighthearted and joking to deeply emotional. Many of these poems are strikingly direct and extremely intense, since, for Catullus, the emotions are much more important than reason. Some people link this emotional intensity with the fact that Verona was a Celtic settlement, which became a Roman **colonia** only a year or two before Catullus was born and suggest that Catullus may therefore have been of Celtic descent. Interestingly though, the main adjective used to describe Catullus in ancient times was **doctus** or 'learned' because he belonged to a group of young poets called the Alexandrian School or 'neoterics' who used as their models the Greek Alexandrian poets of the third century BC.

Catallus 7

Chommoda dicebat, si quando commoda vellet
dicere, et insidias Arrius hinsidias,
et tum mirifice sperabat se esse locutum,
cum quantum poterat dixerat hinsidias.
credo, sic mater, sic liber avunculus eius.
sic maternus auus dixerat atque avia.
hoc misso in Syriam requierant omnibus aures
audibant eadem haec leniter et leviter,
nec sibi postilla metuebant talia verba,
cum subito affertur nuntius horribilis,
Ionios fluctus, postquam illuc Arrius isset,
iam non Ionios esse sed Hionios.

Chommoda he was saying whenever he wished to say commoda
And insidias Arrius was saying hinsidias,
And then he flattered himself that he had spoken wonderfully
Whenever with as much effort as he could he said hinsidias.
I believe, thus his mother, thus his free uncle,
Thus his maternal grandfather and grandmother he said.
With this man having been sent into Syria, everyone's ears found relief:
They were hearing the same thing more softly and more lightly,
Nor afterwards were they themselves fearing such words,
When suddenly the horrible message is brought that:
The Ionian waves, afterwards Arrius had gone there,
Now were no longer Ionios but Hionios.

Catullus seems to be suggesting that Arrius is a man who has risen from humble origins, who is uncertain of his aspirates and in his efforts to sound educated puts them in the wrong places.

1. **vellet**: - 'whenever he wishes to say..'
3. **sperabat**: here 'flattered himself'.
4. **quantum poterat**: i.e. with all the force in his lungs.

5. **credo sic mater**: the **credo** suggests that this explanation is ironical: Arcius must have inherited his idiosyncracies from his mother, for women are regarded as preserving older and purer ways of speaking. See Plato (*Cratylus* 418b) and Cicero (*Brutus* 211), (*De Oratore* III, 45.)

liber: an innuendo, suggesting that Arrius' maternal family was of servile origin but that his maternal uncle claimed free birth.

8. **audibant**: audiebant.

leniter et leviter: **leniter** 'smoothly, without jarring on the ear'; **leviter** either 'softly, in a low tone' or 'without undue emphasis'.

11. **Ionios fluctus**: the Adriatic, which Arcius would cross from Brundisium on his way east.

Catallus 8

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus
advenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias,
ut te postremo donarem munere mortis
et mutam nequiquam alloquerer 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 fraterno multum manantia fletu,
atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.

Wandering through many countries and over many seas
I come, my brother, to these sorrowful obsequies,
to present you with the last death gift,
and speak, though in vain, to your silent ashes,
since fortune has taken your own self away from me
alas, my brother, so shockingly torn from me!
Yet now meanwhile take these offerings, which according to the custom of our ancestors
have been handed down -- a sorrowful tribute -- for a funeral sacrifice;
take them, all wet with a brother's tears,
and for ever, O my brother, hail and farewell!

NOTE:

Catullus joined the staff of Memmius, who went to Bithynia as propraetor in 57 BC. Probably on the outward journey he visited the grave of his elder brother, who died and was buried near the ruins of Troy. In this poem he records and dramatises his pilgrimage to that distant grave of his beloved brother in an alien land. His brother is the only relative mentioned in Catullus' poetry and his death had been a great blow to Catullus. In *Carmen* 68, lines 22-24, he describes the effect it had on him, happening just as he was growing from youth to adulthood:

**tecum una tota est nostra sepulta domus,
omnia tecum una perierunt gaudia nostra
quae tuus in vita dulcis alebat amor.**

Together with you our whole home is buried,
Together with you have perished all our joys,
Which your sweet love used to nourish while you lived.

In visiting his brother's grave and carrying out the traditional Roman funeral rites Catullus is performing an exceptional act of **pietas**.

METRE: ELEGIAC COUPLETS.

Lines:

2. **ad**: final or purpose (as also in line 8) - 'to make this offering' (**inferias**).

inferias: an offering made to the **di manes** - 'the spirits of the departed' at the tomb. The usual gifts were wine, milk, honey and flowers.

munere mortis: a 'gift connected with death, death-gift'.

4. **neququam** : linked with **mutam** - his words are spoken in vain because they can have no answer.

6. **indigne**: adverb used of a death which is 'shocking' because it is premature.

7. **interea**: not here suggesting a provisional arrangement or that Catullus hopes to do more later, but rather 'in the present situation', 'anyhow', 'at any rate' - emphasising the hopelessness of **nunc**,

more parentum: 'according to the custom of our ancestors' .

9. **fraterno ... manantia fletu**: this exaggeration was commonplace in Latin poetry. 'All wet with a brother's tears'.

10. **ave atque vale**: the formula is to be found on sepulchral inscriptions.

more parentum: 'according to the custom of our ancestors' .

8. **tradita sunt...ad inferias:** here as in line 2 **ad** is final or purpose - 'which I have presented for my offering'.

9. **fraterno ... manantia fletu:** this exaggeration was commonplace in Latin poetry. 'All wet with a brother's tears'.

10. **ave atque vale:** the formula is to be found on sepulchral inscriptions. See also above for Aeneas saying farewell to the dead Pallas.