

Explicating Catullus

... nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem,
qui illius culpa cecidit velut prati
ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam
tactus aratro est.

... nor let her, as before, watch for my love which
through her fault has fallen like a flower at a meadow's
rim, touched by a passing plough.
—Catullus, poem 11.21–24

At the conclusion of one of Catullus's most famous poems, the speaker describes the bitter finale of his love. His striking analogy draws on the epic past (in Homer's *Iliad*, a dead warrior is likened to a garden's poppy weighted by rain) and also on a lyric of Sappho, who compares a virgin deflowered on her wedding night to a hyacinth trampled by shepherds. Readers have long appreciated these allusions, but recent feminist scholarship and new approaches to intertextuality and to the interplay of genres have helped further illuminate Catullus's words. Sexual reversals and generic switches enable the poem now to speak to us in new languages that we readily make our own.

In comparing his love to a flower, the speaker appropriates a feminine image while his "girl" (*puella*) implicitly claims the masculine "plough." Inanimate challenges sensate, practical decorative, brutal delicate. The man's highly charged passion is paradoxically treated as virginal, and the woman's promiscuity, whose coarseness Catullus has earlier disclosed, corrupts and destroys a physical relationship whose nature the speaker considers spiritual and chaste.

In addition to epic and lyric, other literary genres complement and complicate Catullus's images. Flower and plough bring to mind pastoral and georgic. Pastoral poetry projects a realm of make-believe where graceful liaisons and shepherds' songs create a precarious arcadia defined by remoteness from the exigencies of time and history. By contrast, georgic poetry looks to practicalities, to an existence well symbolized by the farmer's plough—blunt metal object, here conjuring a lover's failure that heedlessly fells the vulnerable and sequestered.

Finally, to pastoral and georgic we can join two other poetic types. The first is the epithalamium (marriage song). On another occasion, Catullus composed a wedding hymn whose subjects include the bride's virginity, untouched (*intacta*) before her marriage. Here, instead, in a mordant caricature of a poem of rejoicing, it is the enigmatically masculine lover who is "touched," violated by erotic vulgarity.

The second type Catullus evokes is a propemptikon, poem of bon voyage. Once again generic expectations are disappointed. In standard examples, the speaker bids goodbye to a departing friend. Here it is the speaker who takes his leave to experience the world. At the start of the poem he asks his travelling companions to impart to his dissipated lover at once a curse (*non bona dic-ta*) and an ironic adieu: "Let her live and fare well with her adulterers" (*cum suis vivat valeatque moechis*). Be well, the speaker wishes her, using obscene language that also suggests the chronic vigor of her sexual adventures.

Just as the images of flower and plough reverse our expectations, so also do the riffs on other poetic forms that enhance lyric. This is an epithalamium in which the devirginized male is the bride, implicitly shorn of life and then abandoned. It is also a song of parting in which the object of separation stays in place and those going away are bidding farewell before embarking—we are led to believe—on a new enterprise suggesting the expansiveness of freedom. Here, as everywhere in classical literature, the poet's imagination speaks afresh to each generation, to our own through deepened appreciation of the complexities of sexuality as well as of the formative friction arising from the miscegenation of poetic forms.

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