

The Transmission of Catullus

Catullus is the most popular of Roman poets with modern readers because he is seen as modern, immediate, compelling. A contemporary of Cicero, Caesar and Pompey, Catullus lived from about 80-50BC and, in poetry varied in type and meter, wrote about numerous subjects, including his lady-love, of higher social status than of moral fiber, Lesbia (aka Clodia, from one of the oldest, most aristocratic families and married to a woman of the same class).

His output include the kissing poems (*Da mihi basia mille*), directed to Juventius (a young man of good family as well as to Lesbia, lampoons (especially the scurrilous ones to Caesar and the slight mockery to Cicero), friendship poems, and poems about poetry. He wrote short (lyric) poems and long (Alexandrian) poems, based on models from Hellenistic rather than early Greek or Roman models. His 116 poems divide into three major groups, as printed, 1-60 (polymetrics), 61-69 (long) and 70-116 (elegiac couplets).

What we want to know is how Catullus' ideas got set down on paper and then transmitted to our modern texts or translations. Transmission of literature over the ages is often blocked more by neglect than by censorship, so, how, did people read Catullus and react to his poems, and why/how were they passed on?

We know from Catullus' own poems that he sometimes wrote on wax tablets (*tabellae*, *pugillaria*, *codicilli*) –see 50.1-6 and 42.1-6- the standard surface for ephemeral writing (by schoolboys, fishmongers, letter writers) because they were easily re-usable. Catullus tells us how he and Licinius Cavus spent an evening of poetic invention, using tablets as scratch pads (50.1-6) and how a harlot won't give back his tablets (42.1-6), though he doesn't say how she got them.

When he did a finished edition of his poems, he used a papyrus roll (wound around a spindle and well-polished), as he shows in his dedicatory poem (1), where he contrasts his single roll with Cornelius Nepos' 3-roll history, and in his satire on the prolific scribbler Suffenus (22), who has a nice cover (to his poems and to himself) wrapped around much less elegant contents. Literary papyri survive, but virtually all from the sands of Egypt, where the dry climate preserves them, but Egyptians of the late republic/early empire read Greek rather than Latin, so there are very few Latin papyri and only two of them literary (and not Catullan).

How big was Catullus' papyrus roll that he sent to Nepos? Probably not all 116 poems. Some Egyptian papyri rolls were as large as 100', but Greek rolls do not exceed 35'. Books of poetry would still be shorter. Each book of the *Aeneid* is a separate roll of 600 +/- lines, but Catullus' 116 poems would be over 2,000 lines, making a roll of about 45'. But Catullus calls it a "*libellum*" ("little book") and a trifle, so it should not be so long. Since the corpus divides into three types (each group about 650-750 lines), the Catullan corpus may have been on three (or more) rolls.

The transfer from papyrus roll to book (*codex*) took place in the 4th century AD, largely because of the spread of Christianity (with its great use of the Bible as a reference) and the scarcity of papyrus as the Roman Empire broke up. It was difficult to find one's place in a roll (compare finding a spot in an audiotape), so many early pagan authors (such as Homer), when quoted by later authors (such as Plato), were quoted from memory. But that was not good enough for Christian purposes and you couldn't get all of the Bible on one roll anyhow (now even one for Old and one for New Testament) – it would be too clumsy. With trade with Egypt disrupted, a new material had to be used. However, vellum (leather), the material now used, could not easily be rolled. Hence the *codex*, our book form.

How did people read Catullus from his own through 4th century AD? He was a very important poet in his own day – as an innovator, influential on the next generation of poets, including Vergil, but in the next era, “Silver Latin”/ early empire, the Republican aristocratic/oligarchic freedom of speech was no longer possible. (No one wrote anything under Domitian, out of fear.) Martial, for example, avoid contemporary political invective. Catullus had been an important person in his own society, but Martial was a nobody. Martial takes from Catullus that part which was useful; he imitates his epigrams, but only their surface, and thus Catullus becomes a minor poet. By the end of the 2nd century AD hardly anyone is reading Catullus other hand Apuleius and Aulus Gellius. After the 2nd century AD there is no evidence that anyone read a single Catullus poem for 1000 years.

The papyrus roll had given way to the codex in the 4th century AD. There must have been little clamor for Catullus’ 3 rolls, so there were probably few around and even fewer copied into codex form, part of a winnowing that lost a number of other authors and books. Like the hunt for Red October, the search for Catullus in the middle ages gives only occasional soundings. Only 1 manuscript survived in 1300; discovered where and by whom is not known. (Campesani’s verses on the reappearance of Catullus is a riddle about the name of the discoverer.) That manuscript is lost but 3 14th century copies of it have survived.

In the Renaissance, not much happened with Catullus. Until mid-15th century, manuscripts were hard to find and most were very corrupt, hard to read and know the readings. Also, when people read Catullus, they found him very old-fashioned, especially compared to Martial, whom they found more fun.

Then the first printed edition appeared in 1472. (Early printed books tried to look as much as possible like manuscripts)

Turning to a specific example of a Catullan tradition, we can look at #16, especially lines 5-11, in which Catullus says that the poet himself must be chaste though his poetry need not be – in fact, should be naughty enough to stir old men’s loins. Martial picks this up in 1/35, where he answers the complaint of Cornilius that his verses are not serious enough, saying that poems cannot please unless they titillate. Compare Martial 1.4.8 *lasciva est novis pagina, vita proba* and Ovid, *Tristia*, 2.354 *vita verecundaest, Musa iocosa mea*. This theme of the difference between a poet and his poetry can be used as an excuse for writing obscenity, but Christianity opposed lasciviousness not only in the poet’s life but also in his poetry. So, later poets who pick up this theme turn it around and proclaim that their verse also is chaste (e.g., Mantuan and Marullo).

Perhaps the last (or penultimate) word on this belongs to WB Yeats, in his poem “The Scholars”, a reaction to the pedantry of 19th century philologists:
Bald heads forgetful of their sins/
Old, learned, respectable bald head/
Edit and annotate the lines/
That young men, tossing on their beds,
Rhymed out in love’s despair/
To flatter beauty’s ignorant ear. //
All shuffle there; all cough in ink; /
All wear the carpet with their shoes; /
All think what other people think;/
all know the man their neighbor knows/
Lord, what would they say /
Did their Catullus walk that way?