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Dániel Kiss, ed.


This volume consisting of papers from a May 2011 conference held in Munich, is small in size but a treasure trove for us all—philologists, historians, paleographers, students, and dabblers. At its best this collection of six essays (plus introduction) reads like a mystery novel, as we follow the trail of Catullus’s “authentic” text and work by the side of the fine scholars Dániel Kiss has assembled to unravel its mysteries. The material these researchers present is by turns obscure, witty, recherché, surprising, and speculative, but never dull.

Kiss, an authority on Catullus’s manuscript tradition (catullusonline.org), offers a general introduction to the multiple problems plaguing the transmission of Catullus’s corpus, looking specifically at what we know about the state of his poetry book(s) in antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The essays then proceed chronologically for the most part, beginning with one by Kiss on the lost Codex Veronensis (V) and its descendants, in which he attempts to identify V, to determine the value of the recentiores, and to suggest some reasons for the corruption of the manuscript. His search for V is particularly gripping, and his conclusions ought to be given careful attention.

The next two essays move us firmly into to Renaissance. Giuseppe Gilber-to Biondi exhibits, perhaps, the most deft footwork of the entire collection, as he shows how, per Giorgio Pasquali, newer copies may offer better readings and how this strategy does not have to run contrary to Lachmann’s method. Biondi does not tell but rather shows how to do the painstaking work of manuscript analysis, setting “samples taken from Sabellico...with the writings of an extremely learned and expert editor, Avanzi” (33). This chapter, though perhaps more challenging intellectually than the others, has the advantage of clear examples (e.g., detailed analyses of poems 44 and 59) and an abundance of humor. One learns much, wants to learn more, and feels well situated for Julia Haig Gaisser’s essay on Giovanni Gioviano Pontano. Despite his status as one of the most studied Italian humanists—and one Gaisser has previously written about—her treatment of him here feels fresh. Although Pontano’s manuscript of Catullus is lost, Gaisser leads us through the annotations or transcriptions of Francesco Pucci, Basilio Zanchi, and Achilles Statius, recovering
some fifteen readings by Pontano. Along the way, we are invited by Gaisser to think along with her about how Pontano’s notes might offer “some understanding of what Pontano thought about” the poets to whose works he devoted so much time (72), in addition to the words that appeared on his pages.

The next essays propel us beyond the Renaissance, and if you ask “cui bono?”, Antonio Ramírez de Verger has the answer: “if the editions and commentaries of the 16th to the 18th centuries are ignored, we run the risk of falling into the trap of unnecessary repetition and tiresome time-wasting” (94). And so in a very short and accessible essay, Ramírez de Verger introduces a few notes from Heinsius, which have largely been ignored in modern editions. His examples (e.g., Heinsius’s preference for dicebat for ducebat at 8.4) and the detailed explication he offers make this a model for anyone who wants a play-by-play for how textual criticism is done. With the right introduction and follow-up, this would be an excellent introduction for novice students into textual criticism as both an art and a science. From Heinsius we move to Baehrens and Housman in an elegant essay by David Butterfield, who rightly observes that most commentators and readers do not regard their contributions to Catullus’s text as significant. Butterfield offers a beautiful essay—part love-letter, part recuperation, part archival investigation—that seeks to open our eyes to the possibilities of Baehrens’s and Housman’s conjectures. The emendations he offers up not only provoke us to think carefully about the suggestions of these two men, but situate them within a lively classics community in the late 19th century and bring to life them and their lives’ work.

The final essay in the collection, by S.J. Heyworth, looks not at a time period or commentator but instead at a sub-genre of Catullus’s verse, the dialogue poem. Heyworth notes that the repetitions that occur in dialogue poems have resulted in textual errors, and he thinks about how Catullus and his subsequent editors marked shifts in dialogue that can prove so troublesome. While he considers a few poems, he reserves most of his attention for poems 62 and 67, and one of the most startling and compelling arguments of the whole book is to be found here: namely, that poem 67 actually opens at line 3 with the vocative ianua, like the vocatives that begin so many of Catullus’s verses. Whether you agree or not, Heyworth offers a number of such meaty ideas, and the value of examining the formal details of a poem or a series (as opposed to their historical contexts) is amply supported by his work.

The volume is enhanced by a number of plates and images. It is well edited and mercifully free from error (incredibly important in a volume devoted to variant readings). Two appendices make it incredibly valuable for any specialist: an up-to-date
list of Catullus’s surviving manuscripts and an index of manuscripts and annotated copies with their locations.

I can hear you all lifting your collective eyebrow in doubt, but I aver that this is one of the most delightful books I have read in ages, and a book that would benefit us all. The insights into the readings alone are noteworthy for anyone who wants to read Catullus better. Moreover, it would supply an exemplary text for a paleography seminar at the graduate level, or supplement any advanced high school or intermediate college Latin class. It is hard for students (and the rest of us) to understand how the printed volume we now read got to be the way it is, and harder still to comprehend if we work with, say, Ovid’s or Vergil’s corpus, where there are so many manuscripts. Catullus’s size and tradition make it a tangible test case, and the essays in this book could provide any teacher with the raw material to show how a text can be corrupted, how hard it sometimes is to know which reading is the right one, and how working to solve textual problems connects our own work to that of Pasquali, Pontano, Heinsius, and Housman. It is an exciting and lively book that deserves a wide audience. Plus uno maneat perenne saeclo.

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