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Catullus’ short poems are easily the most accessible text taught in Roman Civilization courses. The poems seem to redefine everything students thought they knew about what to expect from a writer in antiquity, drawing students into the world of Roman literature and giving them a vivid sense of the social and historical context at the end of the Republic. It is wonderful to see how Jeannine Diddle Uzzi and Jeffrey Thomson’s new annotated translation of Catullus’ corpus is able to capture the strange surprise of these poems and to introduce the poet fittingly to those without a background in Classics.

A collaboration between a Classicist and a poet, this translation does not aim for a literal, line-by-line translation. Instead, as Uzzi and Thomson put it, “the desire is to approximate the experience of the ancient audience for the modern is precisely what inspired this translation” (2). The result is a concise and extremely vivid version of Catullus’ poems. When reading these translations, we get the sense that we are seeing a streamlined Catullus for the 21st century, with the less accessible features of the text moved to the explanatory notes. Uzzi and Thomson make excellent choices in their adaptation, making sure that every word counts. The treatment of Poem 5 is a particularly strong example of how crisp the translations are throughout the book. The poem ends, “…kiss till / we’re confused and cannot know / and none can count the number of our love”, lines 9–11 (35). The Latin is significantly wordier, and, while some may prefer the confused breathlessness of the original Latin, this more direct version is powerful in its simplicity. The chiastic sound pattern of C’s and N’s in the last two lines of the English translation further helps Uzzi and Thomson’s adaptation to stand on its own as a poem that one might read aloud to enjoy.

At the same time, because the translations are not strictly literal, some favorite moments in the Latin may not be captured in Uzzi and Thomson’s versions of the poems. There are a few instances where it would have made sense to keep the translation closer to the Latin, especially if the translations are to be used in a classroom setting. For instance, in Poem 3 about the death of Lesbia’s pet bird, the translation mourns “the bird she cherished / more than life”, lines 4–5 (33). The Latin reads quem plus illa oculis suis amabat (Cat. 3.5), which should certainly be interpreted, as Uzzi and Thomson suggest, to mean that she cherishes the bird more than anything. Still,
the mention of the *puella*’s eyes in particular in these opening lines has a special point in this poem, which ends by cursing the shades for their worst crime: “Evil deed, wretched bird: / you streak red / the swollen little eyes of my love”, lines 17–19. Part of the joke here is that the reason that Catullus is so devastated about this bird’s death is because it marred his girl’s beauty. Keeping the reference to eyes in the opening of the poem would help the translation capture the ring composition of the original.

Similarly, in the translation of Poem 51, we find “To me he seems a god -- / that man, if man he is, / seems to surpass the gods”, lines 1-3 (80). The Latin, however, translates more literally to something like: “that man seems to me to be equal to the gods—that man, if it is allowed to be said (*si fas est*), seems to surpass the gods.” Uzzi and Thomson’s choice, then, to replace the conditional *si fas est* with “if man he is” shifts the religiosity and meaning of the line significantly. These thoughts, however, are small quibbles and should not detract from the overall success of Uzzi and Thomson’s work.

Readers will be delighted to find notes that are detailed and useful without being unwieldy. The notes on Poem 51, for example, provide a translation of Sappho fr. 31 to compare with Catullus’ adaptation, and the note to Poem 85 describes how the Latin *odi et amo* would be elided to form one massive verb bringing together the ideas of love and hate (308). Often, when Uzzi and Thomson have omitted something or chosen a less literal translation, that choice is discussed or at least signaled in the notes. The poems’ titles are clearly flagged as choices by the editors and not as Catullus’ own, and the thought process behind choosing the title is often explained in the notes.

The book also begins with an excellent, clear, and wide-ranging introduction, which will be useful even for those not intending to use the translation. The essay covers Catullus’ historical context and poetic milieu, introduces a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to speech and gender dynamics, and offers an in-depth analysis of the Lesbia cycle and Lesbia’s role as a poetic construct. As Uzzi explains, “The reason Lesbia is so compelling for us in the modern world is that her name refers not to a single woman but to those many fleeting things human beings pursue: love, art, identity” (27). Readers will also find a fascinating discussion of how Catullus’ poetics might be compared to Eminem’s work, showing several surprising examples of how Eminem echoes Catullus, especially in their claims that they can keep themselves separate from their lyrics and the poetic persona that they portray. Even if one were to find the comparison to be a stretch, the argument is compelling, useful, and guaranteed to stimulate lively discussion in a classroom.
This new translation accomplishes its goals well and does an important service in introducing Catullus to those without a background in Classics while also offering access to the intricacies of his poetics and historical and literary context. We find here not just the Lesbia cycle but also the longer poems, and Uzzi and Thomson offer substantial notes, an introduction, and further bibliography for those who find themselves entranced and wanting to learn more, as many surely will.

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