

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Poems of Gaius Valerius Catullus*. Translated By JOSEPH BIENVENU. Illustrated by THADDEUS CONTI New Orleans: Diálogos Books, 2013. Pp.180. Paperback, \$16.00. ISBN 978-1-935084-17-4.

“He gets the filthy parts just right . . .” Peter Thompson’s blurb is intended as praise, but in fact nails what is wrong with this translation. The obscene and scatological *do* figure prominently in Catullus’ work. And Joseph Bienvenu is at his best handling abuse and invective. But, as they say in commercials, Catullus is all that, and much, much more—in tone, register, genre, meter, and so on. Moreover, the “filthy parts” are not just isolated “parts.” The poet uses them to articulate his aesthetic sensibility, a set of values which applies not only to the composition and appreciation of poetry but also to physical appearance, sexual behavior, social manners—the values of those who share his tastes and can appreciate his poetry, the so-called *neoterics*. These values include wit, charm, grace, elegance, and finesse—not the qualities we associate with the f-bombers of today.

Catullus’ “filth” usually expresses with hyperbolic intensity his outraged sensibilities. Indeed, the targets of some of his vilest invective are those who grossly offend those sensibilities. One such is Aemilius (97) whose mouth is more disgusting than his anus; we can assume that any woman who touches him would rim a diseased hangman, and he is so obtuse that he considers himself *venustus* (one of Catullus’ watchwords).<sup>1</sup> Bienvenu’s version, “he’s handsome,” misses what Peter Green gets with “he’s got charm and class.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the “filthy parts” employ the same resources of poetic expression as the rest of the corpus—word choice, word order, figures, verbal wit and music. Bienvenu gets the filth well enough, but almost always misses the poetic effects. Calling Volusius’ terrible poetry *charta*

<sup>1</sup> A convenient collection and discussion of these key terms appears in Robin Seager, “*Venustus, Lepidus, Bellus, Salsus*: Notes on the Language of Catullus,” *Latomus* 33.4 (1974) 891-94.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Green, trans. and comm., *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) is my gold standard for a version of this poet. Anything Green has to say about translation, especially verse translation, is invaluable, especially for a prospective translator of Latin or Greek. His translation of the galliambics of 63 is virtuosic.

*cacata* (36.1) is lit crit, not potty mouth. Bienvenu's "shit-stained papers" gets the sense, in a current idiom; Green gets those and the equally important alliterative jingle ("crappy chapters").

Three more example of "filth" will suffice. The urgent invitation to Ipsithilla (32) is a witty albeit "dirty" poem. Contents that Merrill called "execrable" in the 1890's aren't particularly shocking by today's standards. An opening trio of conventional endearments (Bienvenu inexplicably renders *mei lepores* as "my whore") leads to the three-word forecast of Olympian endurance *novem continuas fututiones*. Green's "fuckfests" gets obscenity and neologism; Bienvenu's "turns in the sack" gets neither. Here Bienvenu doesn't even "get the filthy parts." (As an aside, he literally doesn't "get" *irrumatio*, mistaking it for *fellatio*, e.g., 16.1 "I'm going to ... suck you off.")

Threatening Aurelius with rape by fish and vegetable (15), on the other hand, seems more shocking (and bizarre!) nowadays. The effect of the conclusion depends in part on sound, metaphor, and word order: *quem attractis pedibus patente porta / percurrent raphanique mugilesque*. (18-19). Neither Bienvenu nor Green preserves the alliteration in 'p', but the former's version is prosaic and flabby "when, with your feet tied tight, radishes / and salted fish will thrust up your open ass." By contrast, Green's "feet spread and strapped, back-passage widely gaping, / reamed all its length with radishes and mullets" renders the ablative phrases concisely and idiomatically with English instrumental phrases; uses the more precise "reamed;" retains the original metaphor of the open gate; and saves the original foreign objects, rather than the non-metaphorical "ass," for the punchline,

Finally, the vignette of Lesbia's back-alley degradation (58) ends in a juxtaposition of registers, obscene and grandiloquent, to amplify the effect: *glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes* (5). Neither Green nor Bienvenu conveys the grandiloquence, but Green's "jacks off" gets the idiom, where Bienvenu's "tries to strip" is euphemistic and ambiguous. Further, he misunderstands or misses the implication of Catullus' former devotion to Lesbia surpassing that to *suos... omnes*—not "everyone else" but "all his kinfolk" (Green).

Scattered throughout this translation one finds gems, for example the pun between "flamboyant" and "flaming" and the assonance in "glitzy ... / ... itch" (16). In a wedding poem (61) it is ingenious to call Fesceninne verse "limericks;" having Hymeneus "dance up the aisle" is a nice cross-cultural touch. "Schlong" for Mentula (114 and others) is a similar touch. But the "okay" for *fas est* (51.2) is *not ok*. On the technical side, there are no line or page numbers, but the volume does include 20+ line drawings by Thaddeus Conti. Pilobolesque multi-partner ménages

correspond to nothing in Catullus; humorous grotesques do reflect that aspect of the collection. Only a few actually illustrate specific poems. Sadly, these sketches are more inventive and worthwhile than the text itself, which is marred by numerous typos, primarily in proper names, “Mamoram” (4); “Sarapis” and “Gajus” (10); “Assinius” (12); “Sermio” (31); “Pollonius” (12) is not a typo but a misreading of the 3<sup>rd</sup> declension dative *Pollioni*.

Readers already have many translations of Catullus to choose from. As indicated above, my recommendation would be Peter Green’s. Others, including those by Guy Lee, Charles Martin, and David Mulroy, would be more suitable than Bienvenu’s, especially for assigning to a class; the last time I taught a Catullus course, I assigned selections from those three.<sup>3</sup> Peter Whigham’s 1966 Penguin, which I read in college, I realize now is too free, but the page layouts do give a visual impression of modernity, capturing the “new” part of Catullus’ “*neoteric*” set.<sup>4</sup> For the general reader, most likely Bienvenu’s intended audience, one could suggest Julia Haig Gaisser’s Penguin anthology of *Catullus in English* for its variety of translators and periods.<sup>5</sup>

Bienvenu has produced some nice versions of individual poems. These might have been better placed in a poetry journal, perhaps *The Exquisite Corpse*, founded and edited by his fellow New Orleanian Andrei Codrescu. Despite occasional glints of Catullan sparkle, though, the collection is simply not good enough, consistently enough.

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<sup>3</sup> Guy Lee, *Catullus: The Complete Poems* (Oxford 1991; first published 1990) [bilingual edition]; Charles Martin, *The Poems of Catullus* (Johns Hopkins University Press 1990; first published 1979); David Mulroy, *The Complete Poetry of Catullus* (University of Wisconsin Press 2002) [translation and commentary].

<sup>4</sup> **Error! Main Document Only.** Peter Whigham, *The Poems of Catullus* (Penguin Books 1966) [various later reissues].

<sup>5</sup> Julia Haig Gaisser (ed.), *Catullus in English* (Penguin Books 2001).