

BOOK REVIEW

Translation As Muse: Poetic Translation in Catullus's Rome. By ELIZABETH MARIE YOUNG. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. Pp. viii + 257. Hardcover, \$50.00. ISBN 978-0-226-27991-6.

This is a fascinating monograph. Young is interested in discussing various aspects of translation, defined broadly as an almost master term for poetic *imitatio*, through the poetry of Catullus. In doing so, she offers original readings of a number of Catullan poems as well as a novel understanding of the importance of translation in Roman culture and poetics. Her redefinition of translation will be either a stumbling block or an epiphany for readers: can we see the impulse to translate as a “muse” (4)? Do other poems of Catullus’ corpus beyond 51 and 66 flaunt his interest in translation? Are various foreign objects and words indications of cultural transfer from Greece to Rome and, thus, emblematic of translation (24)? Young makes clear that the first century BCE was a time of intense awareness of both poetic translation and poetic exploration, and she believes that these two impulses are entwined, much like the beams of Catullus’ Argo (*pineae coniungens inflexae texta carinae*, 64.10; page 28). This book in tandem with the recent works of McElduff and Bettini¹ are important testimonies of a larger movement that aims to valorize translation in Latin poetry, and it succeeds admirably.

The first chapter discusses the metapoetic moments of Catullus 64 that “flag the appropriative genesis of this aggressively Alexandrianizing text” (25). Many of these examples involve the movement of goods (e.g. the Golden Fleece) from East to West, and Young posits these as indicative of the transfer of “a literary treasure of Ptolemaic Egypt westward to Rome” (28). Young’s reading of the purple coverlet against both the luxury of purple clothes imported from the East and Horace’s *purpureus pannus* is persuasive in stressing Catullus’ “aesthetic insubordination” (33) and underscores the way he goes on to valorize the term

¹ McElduff, S. *Roman Theories of Translation* (Routledge, 2013); Bettini, M. *Vertere: Un’antropologia della traduzione nella cultura antica* (Torino, 2012).

purpureus in the poem (37).² Certain observations about the ecphrasis reminded me of the second chapter of B. Dufallo's *The Captor's Image* (Oxford, 2013) and the two chapters in tandem would make for an interesting classroom discussion on literary allusion, visual illusion, and translation. Young's idea that Catullus equates himself as translator to an epic hero is particularly convincing when discussing a possible translation of Callimachus' *Hecale* (41–46).

Other moments are less so: the idea that the "outlandish prodigy of the Argo is a perfect emblem for Catullus's Greakish [sic] epyllion" (28) would be more incontrovertible if Accius (*Medea* frags 1-3, Klotz) did not already feature a similar description of the Argo as a strange spectacle in his tragedy.³ If his version is also a "translation" and just as metapoetic, what does that say about Catullus' originality? Is Accius also to be considered a Hellenistic poet?

The second chapter begins by stressing the craze for luxury items in Catullus' age, the way that foreign imports influenced social position, and Young's theory that "the rise of small-scale, Greek-style poetry in the late-Republican period was bound up with the era's frenetic traffic in foreign-made luxury merchandise" (53). In addition, costly foreign goods pepper Catullus' poems and Young probes how Catullus signifies such objects in selected polymetric poems. Young's analysis of poem 12 leads to the conclusion that the linen napkin, "re-labeled" as a *mnemosynum*, evokes Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, and therefore Catullus transforms a stolen napkin "into a hellenizing poem that invokes a vibrant Greek tradition of kleptomaniacal iambics and epigrams" (63).⁴ Poem 25 also deals with the theft of goods from Catullus; Young discusses the metaliterary significance of the stolen objects, insisting that Catullus here offers "a glimpse of a Greek fighting back against the rapacious claims of a hellenizing Roman poet" (73). But, ultimately, it is Catullus who has the last laugh because he can manipu-

² It would have been nice to see 64.163: *purpureave tuum consternens veste cubile* and 64.307-8: *vestis / candida purpurea talos incinxerat ora* brought into the discussion.

³ Young coins the term "Greakish" as a portmanteau combination of "Greek" and "freakish" to describe the neoteric epyllion. Boyle, A.J. *Roman Tragedy*. (Routledge, 2006), 116–117 mentions how Accius' own description is metatragic and how "linguistic spectacle anticipates, in part constitutes, dramatic spectacle" (117).

⁴ Although Young touches upon the use of *furtum* to indicate a literary theft (63, note 25), she could have even gone further with the metapoetic language of this poem, e.g. Livy tells us of books written on linen (Liv. 4.13.7), the use of *mutari* (12.8) is common for translation, and even *tollere* is used famously by Seneca the Elder in a discussion of "editing" Ovid's work (*Contr.* 2.12). Once one starts to see these poems as metapoetic, it is difficult to know when to stop ...

late the meaning of words, especially Greek words, as a sort of imperialist (poetic) conquest.⁵

This concern with Roman Alexandrianism and its social contexts is likewise the subject of the third chapter, which focuses on poem 4 and the poetic travelogue of the *phaselus*. As in Young's account of Catullus 64, the ship emerges as a "wayfaring hero" (97), an aspiring poet with Alexandrian tendencies (p. 98), and "a prime example of... Roman literary translation" (101). Young connects the ship with Parthenius ("an envoy of translation" 100), which seems like a bit of a leap to me, but her analysis does highlight how the poem could evoke features of stylistic translation and the social/cultural moment of the day. Her subsequent discussion of *Catalepton* 10 stresses how it intertextually satirizes the poet-translators, like Catullus and Vergil, who often hailed from Gaul.

The fourth chapter offers close readings of the translation "preface" poems (50 and 65), in which Young argues that Catullus primes the reader for the translations by offering poems that are "suffused with features that derive from their respective translations" (117). The back-and-forth between poems 50 and 51 is illuminated with an eye to showing the way that Catullus' manipulation of Sappho's Greek ultimately results not in a passive translation, but an active, authoritative poetic voice (that of the *miser poeta*). In like manner, the interplay between poems 65 and 66 reveals how Catullus took up Callimachean mannerisms from *The Lock of Berenice* and applied them to his own poetic persona in poem 65. But some of these mannerisms are also Catullan, so "it is not... so easy to say with certainty that Catullus 'borrows' affective gestures from the *coma*, for the demonstrative *coma* herself may be, in part, his own invention" (138).

This crux is further explored in the subsequent chapter, which offers a sustained study of the inventive ways that Catullus utilizes this poem to create "a 'Callimachus' of his own design" (141). Once framed in the larger Catullan context, the poem becomes infused with the world of Catullus' elegiac concerns as well as Roman cultural and social mores (e.g. its position as a *munus* between Catullus and Hortalus), while also acting as a natural extension to the Callimachean elegiac strategies exemplified in his *Actia*. Young believes that the *Plokamos* is prominent throughout Catullus' elegiacs and, therefore, "this entire set

⁵ One may wonder how a poem like 33 fits into this paradigm, where a Roman is deemed a *cinaedus* (cf. 25.1) and another theft being rectified in verse.

of poems is posing itself as one vast allusive playground where the author ranges at will between translation and original expression” (165).

The final chapter discusses Catullus’ most famous translation, poem 51’s rendering of Sappho 31. Young reads the scene of jealous infatuation as an articulation of “the ambivalent emotions prompted by translation itself” (167) by positioning the poem within the discourse of competitive *aemulatio* that defines the creation of so much Roman poetry. By inserting the names Lesbia and Catullus into his translation, Catullus not only claims authorship of the poem, but also asserts his power of transformative translation. This chapter’s close attention not only to the particulars of translating Sappho’s Greek, but also the valence of *otium* in the poem’s *sphragis* make it particularly compelling. An epilogue on Catullus’ appropriative poetics in his epigrams concludes the monograph and shows how these short lyrical outbursts are chockfull of allusive material from Greek epigrams.

Throughout the study, Young displays a fine ear for the sounds and rhythms of Catullus’ poetry and the way that the meter, word placement, and verbal structure of the poems help to create meaning. My only quibble is that sometimes I found myself wanting more discussion of the actual mechanics of *translation*, e.g. there is no sustained discussion of the Greek of the *Plokamos* in her reading of Catullus 66, which feels like a missed opportunity. In conclusion, this book offers a series of challenging interpretations of Catullus and his erudite Hellenistic poetics, a poetics in which translation needs to be taken seriously as not only a creative spur, but also a hermeneutic lens.

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