

## Introduction: The Young Poet in Rome

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Romae vivimus: illa domus,  
illa mihi sedes, illic mea carpitur aetas.  
(Poem 68.34–5)

Catullus is the most accessible of the ancient poets. His poems (even the very long ones) convey an emotional immediacy and urgency that claim the reader's sympathy. The emotions themselves—love, sorrow, pleasure, hatred, contempt—are clear, direct, passionate, very much like our own, we are tempted to imagine. They are set out for us not in the abstract but in the real, historical world of late republican Rome. This Rome, evoked for us with a few light, sharp strokes, is a virtual character in the poetry, with its politicians, playboys (and girls), low-lifes, and fellow poets. Catullus' language seems for the most part as clear and direct as his feelings. His characteristic meter, the phalaecean hendecasyllabic, is relaxed, conversational, and memorable. He is learned (formidably so), but a first reader does not have to be equally learned in order to respond to him. Many of his poems are short of fewer than 20 lines, so that even a novice Latinist can take them in at a sitting.

But Catullus' accessibility is deceiving. He draws us into his world and its emotional landscape so artfully that we think we know him much better than we do, rather like a seemingly open and guileless acquaintance we have known for a time and then realized we did not know at all. The emotional immediacy and factual details in Catullus' poems can make us forget that his poetry, like all poetry, is a fiction. The Catullus we see in the poems is a character or persona created by Catullus the poet, and we can never be sure where the one leaves off and the other begins. We will look more closely at the Catullan persona in chapter 3. In this chapter, however, we will consider what we can know about Catullus the poet,

the maker (not the subject) of the poetry, and about the world in which he created his poems.

### Fragments of a Biography

A few details of Catullus' life are recorded by ancient sources. The fourth-century writer Jerome mentions Catullus twice in his *Chronica* (a chronological list of historical dates). For 87 B.C. he says: "Gaius Valerius Catullus the lyric writer is born in Verona" (*Chronica* 150H); for 58 B.C.: "Catullus dies at Rome in the thirtieth year of his life" (*Chronica* 154H). But Jerome's dates cannot be right. Catullus mentions events of both 55 and 54, and he was still alive as late as August 54 (the date of his friend Calvus' prosecution of Vatinius, mentioned in poem 53).<sup>1</sup> Scholars generally accept the idea that Catullus died when he was twenty-nine or thirty. (Perhaps he did, even if dying young is a very "poetic" thing to do.) They adjust Jerome's chronology accordingly, dating Catullus' life to something like 84–54 or (more often) 82–52. But Jerome's testimony is important even though his chronology is inaccurate. He gives us at least approximate dates, identifies Catullus as a lyric poet (a point that is often disputed, as we will see), and places him in Verona and Rome, sites that resonate powerfully (and in different keys) in his poetry.

Jerome probably took his information on Catullus from a much earlier work on the lives of literary men called *De viris illustribus*, written by the biographer Suetonius around the beginning of the second century. This work is now lost, but Suetonius preserves another important biographical snippet in his *Life of Julius Caesar*. He uses the following anecdote about Catullus to demonstrate Caesar's eagerness to lay aside even legitimate grievances.

Caesar did not hide the fact that Valerius Catullus had placed a permanent mark of infamy on him with his verses about Mamurra. But when Catullus apologized, he invited him to dinner on the same day, and continued to enjoy the hospitality of his father as he had been in the habit of doing. (*Life of Julius Caesar* 73)

Catullus wrote two poems attacking Caesar and his henchman Mamurra (29 and 57).<sup>2</sup> Suetonius (and Caesar) could have had both poems in mind, but 57 is especially virulent. It begins:

Pulcre convenit improbis cinaedis,  
 Mamurrae pathicoque Caesarique. (57.1–2)  
 (The shameless faggots are well matched,  
 Both queer Mamurra and Caesar too.)

The story in Suetonius is valuable evidence for the circulation of Catullus' poetry, for the verses on Mamurra must have been very widely known for Caesar to believe that he had received "a permanent mark of infamy." The story is also surprisingly informative about Catullus' family and social position. The essential point is that the Valerii of Verona had enough status and wealth and a sufficiently grand establishment to qualify as frequent hosts to a great man like Caesar. Italian tradition since the time of the Renaissance has located their property at Sirmione (ancient Sirmio) on a beautiful peninsula of Lake Garda near Verona. The tradition was inspired by archeological evidence (ruins of a great Roman villa of the first century A.D. are found on the site), but still more by Catullus' poem 31, in which he salutes Sirmio as his home and refers to himself as its master (*erus*). Modern scholars have agreed with the identification, and it has been suggested that the site was still in the family a century after Catullus' time when the villa was built.<sup>3</sup> Suetonius does not say when Catullus' apology and dinner with Caesar took place, but it would have been in the middle 50s during the Gallic wars when Caesar generally wintered in Cisalpine Gaul ("Gaul on this side of the Alps," i.e., northern Italy).<sup>4</sup> In any case, Catullus' father (whom the poet never mentions) was still alive at the time.

The most famous piece of ancient biographical information comes from Apuleius in the *Apology* (mid-second century). In response to the charge of using pseudonyms for the boys he addresses in his erotic poetry he says: "By the same token they should accuse Gaius Catullus because he used the name Lesbia for Clodia" (*Apology* 10). Apuleius' identification of Lesbia places Catullus' most famous subject and the poems about her in a particular social context, for Clodia was a member of one of the greatest and most ancient patrician families in Rome, the Claudii. The spelling of her name (Clodia, not Claudia) tells us that she was a sister of the infamous demagogue Publius Clodius Pulcher, who used the "popular" spelling. But it is not clear which sister she was.<sup>5</sup> Clodius had three sisters, all named Clodia, the feminine form of their *nomen*. Like most aristocratic women, they were differentiated either by the genitive form of their husband's name or by an ordinal number corresponding to their place in the birth order of female children (Prima, Secunda, Tertia,

etc.). Thus, the three were Clodia Metelli (Clodia the wife of Metellus), Clodia Luculli (Clodia the wife of Lucullus), and Clodia Tertia, who was the third daughter born, but not the youngest of the surviving group (Clodia Luculli was the youngest). Clodia Metelli is generally identified as Lesbia, largely on the basis of Cicero's racy and slanderous portrait of her in his oration *Pro Caelio*. But she is not the only possible candidate. Little is known of Clodia Tertia, but Clodia Luculli lived at least as fast and loose as Clodia Metelli. All three sisters, but especially Clodia Metelli and Clodia Luculli, were rumored to have committed incest with their brother Clodius. The charge is reflected in Catullus' invective on "Lesbius pulcer" in poem 79, which begins:

Lesbius est pulcer; quid ni? Quem Lesbia malit  
 quam te cum tota gente, Catulle, tua. (79.1–2)  
 (Lesbius is pretty. Why not? For Lesbia would prefer him  
 to you with your whole family, Catullus.)

From the details provided by Jerome, Suetonius, and Apuleius we can begin to piece together the outlines of the poet's life. He was born in the 80s and died about thirty years later. He was of a wealthy and important provincial family in an area that had come fairly recently under Roman control. (The settlements in northern Italy between the Alps and the river Po were designated Latin colonies in 89 and their inhabitants, called Transpadani, "people on the other side of the Po," received a general grant of Roman citizenship only in 49.) He lived for some time in Rome and wrote poems to a patrician woman (Clodia) calling her by the pseudonym Lesbia. He died in Rome.

A few more pieces of the poet's biography can be gleaned from the poems themselves. Catullus tells us that he served in the *cobors* or entourage of Memmius in Bithynia (poems 10 and 28). He also says he didn't like it. Since Memmius is known to have been governor of Bithynia in 57–56, Catullus' complaints provide one secure date in his biography and poetry: poems 10 and 28 and the others referring to Bithynia (31 and 46) were written in 57–56 or later. His presence in Memmius' *cobors* helps to flesh out the picture of his social status we saw in Suetonius, for such positions were held by young men with excellent connections and political prospects. Being in a governor's *cobors* was not uncommon in Catullus' circle, nor was coming home disenchanted with it. Catullus' friends Veranius and Fabullus served in Piso's *cobors* in Spain (poems 12, 28, 47), and they seem to have enjoyed their experience no more than Catullus did. Their

dissatisfaction, like Catullus', was financial: they had expected to make money out of the province and failed to do so. We get a glimpse of the expectations and frustrations of such young men in poem 10. (Catullus is reporting a conversation with his friend Varus and Varus' girlfriend.)

Huc ut venimus, incidere nobis  
 sermone varii: in quibus, quid esset  
 iam Bithynia; quo modo se haberet;  
 ecquonam mihi profuisset aere.  
 Respondi, id quod erat, nihil neque ipsis  
 nec praetoribus esse nec cohorti,  
 cur quisquam caput unctius referret,  
 praesertim quibus esset irrumator  
 praetor, nec faceret pili cohortem. (10.5–13)

(When we got there, various topics came up in our conversation—among them what Bithynia was like now, how it was doing, whether I had made any money out of it. I replied (and it was true) that neither the natives nor the praetors nor the entourage had any way to line their pocket—especially those whose praetor screwed them and didn't give a damn for his entourage.)

Catullus also speaks of a brother (otherwise unknown), whose death in Troy he laments in poems 65, 68, and 101. Poetically the brother is useful and important, providing an emotionally powerful foil to Lesbia, and representing the pull of Verona and familial love against that of Rome and eros. But the only thing we know about him is his death far from home, and that only from Catullus. Another detail that emerges from the poetry is mysterious in a different way. A dozen or so of Catullus' 116 poems can be dated, but none of the datable poems falls outside the short period 57–56 to 54.<sup>6</sup> The fact may or may not be significant. Perhaps he wrote all of the extant poems within a period of three or four years, but it is also possible that the clustering of datable poems is a coincidence.<sup>7</sup>

A final piece of the poet's biography is so large that we might almost overlook it even though it overshadows all the rest. At some point Catullus went to Rome. We do not know when or why he did so, but there are some probabilities. It is likely that he arrived at some time in the late 60s or early 50s, perhaps with the intention of embarking on a political career. The career did not materialize, but he settled in Rome, anyway. A number of his poems are set in the territory of Verona, but it is Rome that he celebrates as his home, as in poem 68:

. . . Romae vivimus: illa domus,  
 illa mihi sedes, illic mea carpitur aetas. (68.34–5)  
 (I live in Rome. That is my home,  
 that is my place, there my life is spent.)

In the rest of this chapter we will consider what Rome was like—politically, socially, intellectually—for the young poet living there in the last decades of the Roman republic.

### Politics

Rome in the 50s B.C. was a large, dirty, rich, violent, exciting city, the head of an increasingly far-flung empire that stretched from Asia Minor in the east to Spain in the west, taking in parts of north Africa on the way. Political strife had been a constant accompaniment to its great and still growing power, and in the 50s—the last full decade of the Roman republic—violence, social unrest, and the competition for political supremacy intensified. In 59 the three rival dynasts, Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus, formed an uneasy alliance (the so-called first triumvirate) that held together for the first half of the decade. The alliance on the part of Caesar and Pompey was sealed with the marriage of Caesar's daughter Julia to Pompey. The marriage made Caesar Pompey's father-in-law, a fact that provided irresistible fodder for political satirists. Catullus makes a jingle of it in the last line of poem 29:

socer generque, perdidistis omnia? (29.24)  
 (father-in-law and son-in-law, have you squandered everything?)

Each of the three stood to gain by their arrangement, but Caesar's prize turned out to be greatest: a special command in transalpine Gaul. He waged a long and brutal campaign (58–51), brought Gaul under Roman control, and enriched himself and his friends. The three renewed their agreement in 56. Under the new agreement Pompey and Crassus became consuls in 55; Caesar's command in Gaul was renewed for five years, which Pompey became governor of Spain and Crassus of Syria, which he used as a base to attack the Parthians. But this time the agreement could not hold. After Pompey's wife Julia died in 54 and Crassus and his army were massacred by the Parthians in 53, there was nothing to prevent Pompey and Caesar from becoming open enemies. The two jockeyed for

supremacy for the rest of the decade, and events marched toward the civil war that began in 49 when Caesar invaded Italy with his Gallic legions.

Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus were the principals in the power struggles of the 50s, but there were also other players. Among the most important was Clodia's brother, Publius Clodius Pulcher.<sup>8</sup> Clodius had his own ambition: to control the city through the urban mob. To do so, he needed to become tribune of the *plebs*, which required renouncing his status as a patrician and transferring to the *plebs*. He achieved this feat in 59 with the connivance of the triumvirate, but for the most part he remained an independent operator outside their control. He won popular support by distributions of grain and used gangs of thugs to terrorize his opponents. In 58 he satisfied an old grudge against Cicero by getting him exiled in spite of Pompey's attempts to defend him, and he used his thugs to try to forestall efforts to recall him, breaking up assemblies and even besieging Pompey in his house. But Clodius' opponents had armed gangs of their own, and there were bloody battles between them. In 52 Clodius was murdered on the Appian Way by the gang of Pompey's supporter Milo. Rioting followed. Clodius' body was carried to the forum, where the fires of his funeral pyre destroyed the Senate House. In the aftermath Pompey was named sole consul, setting the stage for his confrontation with Caesar.

We cannot know how many of these events Catullus was in Rome to see or hear about. The date of his arrival in the city is unknown. He would have missed much of the excitement in 57–56 over Cicero's return from exile since he was in Bithynia with Memmius' *cohort*, and perhaps he did not live to know of Crassus' great disaster in 53 or Clodius' murder in 52. But he would have seen plenty of political turmoil all the same. Like everyone in Rome, he was aware of the violence in the streets and of the high-handed behavior of the great and powerful. As an intimate of Clodia, he would have had a privileged perspective on Clodius' activities. Major political figures appear in several of his poems: Caesar in 11, 29, 54, 57, and 93, Clodius in 79, Pompey in 29 and 113, Cicero in 49. Other figures less well known to us but famous at the time appear in many more.<sup>9</sup>

### High Society

The Valerii Catulli of Verona were *domi nobiles* ("nobles at home"). (The term describes families rich and important in their native province who had not yet "arrived" socially and politically in Rome). Catullus was

sufficiently well connected to join a governor's entourage and to move in at least some of the higher circles of Roman society. His friend and fellow poet C. Licinius Calvus, for example, was a rising political orator from a prominent family: Calvus' father was a praetor, and a Licinius had been consul as early as the fourth century.<sup>10</sup> Catullus' lover Clodia (whichever Clodia she was) had even higher social credentials. As Cicero reminds Clodia Metelli in his oration *Pro Caelio*:

Had you not seen that your father was a consul, had you not heard that your uncle, your grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather, great-great-great-grandfather were consuls? (Cicero, *Pro Caelio* 34)

Catullus' ancestry could not compete with those of Calvus or Clodia, for he was probably descended from Italian or Roman settlers who had moved into Transpadane territory around the end of the second century, ordinary men who had done very well in their new surroundings, perhaps in commerce of some kind.<sup>11</sup> But he was no country bumpkin either. In the late republic provincial families like his were in the process of rising to senatorial rank within a generation or two (his own family would accomplish the feat by the time of Tiberius in the early first century A.D.).<sup>12</sup> He had a splendid education, as the learning—especially the Greek learning—of his poetry attests. He had plenty of money, and whatever he chose to do with it, a family connection with Caesar. Above all, he had great literary talent and interests in tune with contemporary poetics, as we will see in the last section of this chapter.

Many modern scholars argue that Catullus' provincial origins made him an outsider in Roman society and that he was correspondingly anxious about his status.<sup>13</sup> Certainly the persona we meet in his poems is very much attuned to nuances of behavior, status, and even accent. In poem 44 he notes that some people might think his country house has the wrong address (in rustic Sabine territory as opposed to fashionable Tibur). In poem 12 he castigates someone gauche enough to filch a napkin at a dinner party. In poem 84 he mocks a certain Arrius who mispronounces his aitches. But similar comments can be found in his contemporaries, particularly in Cicero. Cicero, too, can be seen as socially insecure (he was a "new man," the first in his family to reach the consulship, and like Catullus, he came to Rome from elsewhere in Italy). The more important point, however, is that Roman society in general was alert to details of behavior, dress, and speech as markers of status. Men (for it was men who appeared in public settings) both closely observed



each other for such markers and were careful to construct their own performance to confirm their place on the desired rung of the hierarchical ladder. It is safe to say that Catullus shared his society's preoccupation—he could hardly do otherwise. Allusions to status in his poetry demonstrate his interest (as well as the fact that he was a keen observer of social behavior). But they cannot show that his interest was different in kind or degree from that of his contemporaries. To put it another way: we cannot infer deep *personal* anxiety about his status from particular poems.

The markers of status in Roman society were various in kind. Some were obvious and definite: pedigree, wealth, political power. Others were intangible, the sum of selected personal qualities of behavior, speech, and appearance. Among the most important intangible markers was *urbanitas*, which we can translate as “urban sophistication”—but only so long as we remember that such terms are not universal and unchanging across societies or even over time in the same society. (Consider the difference between the “urban sophistication” of the *Thin Man* movies of the 1930s and that of *Seinfeld* or *Sex in the City* in the 1990s.) Elite Romans themselves saw *urbanitas* as indefinable: they knew it when they saw it.<sup>14</sup> Pressed for a definition of “an urban coloring” (*urbanitatis color*) in rhetoric, Cicero says: “I don’t know. I only know that it exists” (*Brutus* 171). But the very indefinability of *urbanitas* was its strength. The people who had it knew what it was; their shared possession of it bound them together, as did their confidence that others could not fully understand or achieve it. Its power to exclude is nicely summed up in this definition by Michael Winterbottom: “*Urbanitas* was the code of attitudes and behaviour employed by the sophisticated ancient to make the outsider feel small.”<sup>15</sup> As Winterbottom’s words suggest, *urbanitas* was a composite of qualities. It included what was tasteful (*elegans*), witty (*facetus*), charming (*lepidus*), attractive (*venustus*), nice (*bellus*), and humorous (*festivus*). We will discuss some of these words in later chapters. For now the important point is the fluidity and relative vagueness of *urbanitas* and its components and their precariousness as social markers. A man’s pedigree was stable, his wealth and political power perhaps somewhat less so; but *urbanitas* could be compromised in an instant by an ill-judged action or remark. In poem 22 Catullus shows us how fragile *urbanitas* is for the poet Suffenus<sup>16</sup>:

Suffenus iste, Vare, quem probe nosti,  
homo est venustus et dixit et urbanus,

idemque longe plurimos facit versus.

...

haec cum legas tu, bellus ille et urbanus  
Suffenus unus caprimulgus aut fossor  
rursus videtur. (22. 1–3, 9–11)

(That Suffenus, Varus, whom you know well, is a charming and witty  
and urbane fellow, and yet he makes by far the most verses.)

...

When you read these things, that smart and urbane Suffenus now seems  
an ordinary goatmilkmaid or a ditchdigger.)

Although many markers of status operated across elite society, the Roman social world was not monolithic. It contained different circles whose attitudes, interests, and activities varied widely. The circle we meet in Catullus' poetry is young, well-off, pleasure-loving, and focused more on private concerns than on public responsibility.<sup>17</sup> In this respect they were at odds with traditional Roman values, which promoted worthwhile activity (*negotium*) on behalf of the state. Men were supposed to keep busy—in the army, in politics, in provincial administration, or even in commerce. But not everyone did. In the late republic there were plenty of privileged young men who used their wealth and position to suit themselves, perhaps dipping in and out of politics, perhaps dropping out of public life altogether, as Catullus seems to have done. Cicero likes to talk about such young men about town, his tone hostile or indulgent depending on the situation. In an oration against Catiline he portrays some of them as vicious and dangerous revolutionaries (*In Catilinam* 2.22–4), but in his defense of Caelius he takes a softer line: youth should be allowed its pleasures before it assumes the responsibilities of marriage, the forum, and the state (*Pro Caelio* 42). In both contexts he describes them as given over to a life of pleasure: love, all-night parties, dancing, and adultery.<sup>18</sup>

Catullus presents himself and his friends in a different light. Their *otium*, which means not “leisure” or “idleness” exactly, but perhaps something we could call “lack of *negotium*,” or “lack of busy-ness,” includes sensual pleasures and a certain amount of frivolity; but it is not merely a slothful refusal of gainful employment as Cicero and other traditionalists would see it, but rather a positive choice of private over public life. An important component in their choice is a shared commitment to poetry, whether writing it, talking about it, or criticising it. Catullus often shows poetry as an activity shared by members of the group: for example, in poem 14 Calvus sends Catullus a collection of terrible poems as a gift

and Catullus threatens to retaliate; in 22 Catullus criticises Suffenus' poems to his friend Varus; in 35 he writes to Caecilius about one of Caecilius' poems; in 38 he asks Cornificius for a poem of consolation; in 50 he recalls writing poems for fun with Calvus when they were *otiosi* ("at leisure"). Poetry was the activity of their *otium*, but it was also serious business. Cicero speaks approvingly of the great Roman hero Scipio Africanus, who was said "even in *otium* to think about *negotia*" (*De officiis*. 3.1.1). We might say the same of the young men in Catullus, except that theirs was a different *negotium*: not matters of state but poetry.

### Sexual Attitudes

To the social markers discussed in the last section we must add another, which some modern scholars consider the most important of all: masculinity.<sup>19</sup> In the rigidly hierarchical world of Roman society masculinity represented not merely the possession of certain physical attributes, but status, domination, and power. Masculinity manifested itself in carriage, speech, actions, and conduct, but above all in the sexual act, its most basic demonstration of control. The dominance belonged to the one who penetrated another with his penis, whether he did so vaginally, anally, or orally (respectively, *futuere*, *pedicare*, *irrumare*); and the one penetrated, whether female or male, was considered submissive and lesser in power and status.<sup>20</sup> The essential point was not the sex of the person with whom a man performed a sexual act, but whether or not he was the penetrator. The ability to penetrate another was a demonstration of masculinity and power; submitting to penetration (or being forced to submit) was an act of softness (*mollitia*) and an acknowledgement of inferiority. For a male slave it was just another aspect of his servitude; for an adult male citizen it was humiliating and shameful. Women did not play an important role in this social calculus of dominance and submission. Of course they participated in sexual activity, whether willingly or unwillingly, and whether as wives, mistresses, prostitutes, or slaves. But since it was a given that they were the ones penetrated, they occupied the negative pole of the virility continuum: the penetrated male was said "to suffer the woman's role" (*muliebria pati*). The contest of masculinity was for men.

Dominance could be demonstrated by actual sexual acts, but also by verbal or physical aggression, threats of homosexual rape, and accusations of *mollitia* or of having endured oral or anal penetration.<sup>21</sup> Catullus'

poetry contains many examples of masculine accusations and threats, the most famous being in poem 16.

Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo,  
 Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi,  
 qui me ex versiculis meis putastis,  
 quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum. (16.1–4)  
 (I'll bugger you and stuff it down your throats,  
 queer Aurelius and faggot Furius!  
 who think from my verses, because they're  
 a little soft, that I'm not quite modest.)

Furius and Aurelius have accused Catullus of being *parum pudicum* (“not quite modest”—i.e., “unmale” and submitting to penetration by another) because he writes poems that are *molliculi* (“a little soft”) and *parum pudici*. He retaliates by threatening to demonstrate his masculinity by raping them anally and orally. The threat is heightened if we agree with Wiseman that the epithets *pathice* and *cinaede* are proleptic or anticipatory and that Furius and Aurelius will be *made* pathic and “unmale” by his rape.<sup>22</sup> Catullus’ masculinity will be asserted by his act, while theirs will be diminished or destroyed. Since phallic aggression was a display of power, the exercise of domination and control could be represented metaphorically as a sexual act.<sup>23</sup> In both poem 10 and poem 28 Catullus characterizes Memmius, the praetor with whom he served in Bithynia, as an *irrumator* (literally, someone who penetrates his “partner” orally). In 28 the language is graphic:

O Memmi, bene me ac diu supinum  
 tota ista trabe lentus irrumasti. (28.9–10)  
 (O Memmius, when I was on my back you took your time and stuffed my  
 mouth well and long with that whole beam of yours.)

Memmius had greater power and status than Catullus and let his subordinate know it, and Catullus describes his contemptuous domination in sexual terms. The metaphor in his description is not dead or even faded, but as potent as Catullus’ Memmius, taking its force from the deep-seated connection between social standing and aggressive masculinity.

No label of effeminacy or homosexuality was attached to a man who penetrated another male, for as we have seen, his masculinity depended on his being the penetrator, not on the sex of the person he penetrated. But there were clearly understood laws about the status and character of his partners.<sup>24</sup> Free-born citizen boys were off-limits, as were free-born

girls, married women, and slaves used without their owner's consent. Foreigners, one's own slaves, and citizens of either sex who had engaged in prostitution were fair game. A slave in Plautus' comedy *Curculio* explains the rules to his young master: "Make love to anything you like, as long as you keep away from the wife, the widow, the virgin, young men, and free-born boys" (lines 37–8).

Within these limits the elite male could do as he pleased, but the conduct of elite women was closely scrutinized. The Roman matron was protected by law and custom from rape or seduction, but if her virtue was suspect, she was subject to punishment by her husband or family that—in theory, at least—might include even death.<sup>25</sup> At the least, however, she became vulnerable to slander and humiliation. The reputation of Clodia Metelli was such that Cicero felt free to treat her publicly with vicious contempt. In *Pro Caelio*, his speech in defense of her former lover M. Caelius Rufus, he calls her "a woman not only noble but notorious" (*Pro Caelio* 31), alludes insinuatingly to the rumors of her relations with Clodius ("her husband—I meant to say her brother—I always make that mistake;" *Pro Caelio* 32), and refers to her as *amicam omnium*, which we might translate as "everyone's very good friend" (*Pro Caelio* 32). Modern scholars have correctly cautioned against uncritical belief in Cicero's characterization of Clodia.<sup>26</sup> But his account is still valuable—not so much for its portrait of the historical Clodia as for the insight it provides into contemporary attitudes. In his sketch of the immoral behavior of a supposedly hypothetical woman (intended to be recognized as Clodia) we get a contemporary glimpse of decadent high life and its likely social consequences for a woman too publicly engaged in it.

I say nothing now against this woman [Clodia]. But just suppose there were someone unlike her who made herself available to everyone, who always had an openly declared lover, into whose garden, house, seaside villa every lecher went back and forth at will, who even kept young men and compensated for their fathers' stinginess with her own generosity; suppose a widow were living freely, a bold widow were living shamelessly, a rich widow extravagantly, a lecherous widow like a whore, would I consider anyone who greeted her a little too freely an adulterer? (*Pro Caelio* 38)

### New Poets and Poetry

Catullus arrived in Rome in time to become a major figure in a group of poets engaged in a new kind of poetry. The poets were young, like

Catullus; and like him, they differed from many of their predecessors in being financially independent, which meant they could suit themselves about what and how they wrote. Modern scholars generally call them “neoteric” or “new poets.” The term is convenient although it does not appear in the works of the poets themselves.<sup>27</sup> The poetry they wrote was largely influenced by the Greek poets of third-century Alexandria, combining the ideas of the Alexandrian scholar-poet Callimachus with traditional Roman forms and adding new stylistic devices and themes to the Roman repertoire.<sup>28</sup> To the modern reader it seems to have an air of freshness and novelty, but so little Latin poetry survives from the late second and early first century that we cannot be sure to what extent the neoterics were breaking with their predecessors rather than building on their work and taking it in new directions. Roman poets had been imitating Greek and even Alexandrian models for generations. To take just one example, around 85 B.C. the young Cicero made a Latin translation of Aratus’ quintessentially Alexandrian poem *Phaenomena* (on the constellations); his translation shows many features of archaic poetic style, but also many stylistic devices more commonly associated with the neoterics and the poets of the Augustan age.<sup>29</sup> But the new poets, even if they were not entirely “new”, seem both to be more intensely focussed on Alexandrian poetics than their predecessors had been, and to share ideas about literary style and subject matter to a greater degree.

For us Catullus is the important figure in the group. He is, after all, the one whose poetry survives. But we have to remember that the survival of any ancient work is largely a matter of luck—Catullus himself survived the middle ages in a single manuscript that could have been lost or destroyed at any point in a thousand years, as we will see in Chapter 7. The other neoterics are known to us from several sources: from a few fragments quoted by later writers, from references in Catullus, from their influence on later poetry, and from the historical record. The most important were C. Licinius Calvus and C. Helvius Cinna.

Calvus (born in 82 and dead by 47) was nearly Catullus’ exact contemporary, and—to judge by the ways and the number of times Catullus mentions him—his closest friend among the neoterics. Catullus shows himself and Calvus teasing each other with gifts of the works of terrible poets (poem 14) and playing with different meters for amusement (50), but he also laughingly celebrates Calvus’ oratorical prowess (53) and writes a consolation for the death of Calvus’ beloved Quintilia (96). This last poem gives us a glimpse into the way in which the neoterics liked to play with the same subjects, bouncing their ideas and themes back and

forth.<sup>30</sup> Calvus had written a lament for Quintilia, of which only two fragments survive.<sup>31</sup> (Quintilia seems to be the speaker in both.)

cum iam fulva cinis fuero (Calvus, fragment 15 Courtney)

(when I shall soon be yellow ash)

forsitan hoc etiam gaudeat ipsa cinis (Calvus, fragment 16 Courtney)

(perhaps the very ash may rejoice even in this)

This verse and a half (which might or might not go together) is all we have of what might have been a much longer poem. (We have them at all only because they were quoted by a later grammarian to show that Calvus treated the noun *cinis*, “ash,” as feminine although it is usually masculine.) The meter is elegiac couplet, traditional for laments and grave inscriptions.<sup>32</sup> Catullus’ reply is the same meter.

Si quicquam mutis gratum acceptumve sepulcris

accidere a nostro, Calve, dolore potest,

quo desiderio veteres renovamus amores

atque olim missas flemus amicitias,

certe non tanto mors immatura dolori est

Quintiliae, quantum gaudet amore tuo. (96)

(If anything pleasing or welcome can come about for the silent dead from our grief, Calvus, from the painful longing with which we revive old loves and weep for friendships once thrown away, certainly Quintilia does not grieve so much at her early death as she rejoices in your love.)

Too little of Calvus’ poem remains for us to see exactly how Catullus answers it, but some points are clear. Both poets have taken as their theme Quintilia’s death and her pleasure in Calvus’ love even after death. Catullus answers Calvus’ “perhaps” (*forsitan*) with his own “certainly” (*certe*) and echoes Calvus’ *hoc . . . gaudeat* with *gaudet amore tuo*, which he makes the climax of his poem. Quintilia is the speaker in Calvus. Catullus wittily silences her in his own first line (note the phrase “silent dead,” *mutis sepulcris*) and makes himself the speaker. With the change he takes Calvus’ theme in a different direction—lamenting with him and consoling him at the same time.

Cinna was probably a few years older than Catullus and Calvus. His date of birth is unknown, but he died under famous circumstances in 44. He was torn to pieces at the funeral of Julius Caesar by the angry mob in mistake for a different Cinna (L. Cornelius Cinna), who was known to be one of Caesar’s enemies.<sup>33</sup> Like Catullus, Cinna was from Cisalpine

Gaul, and poem 10 suggests that he was in Memmius' entourage in Bithynia with Catullus in 57–56. (In 10.27–30 Catullus has to admit that the litter bearers he claimed to have brought from Bithynia were really Cinna's.) But Cinna also seems to have been in Bithynia much earlier, for he is usually thought to have acquired the Greek poet Parthenius of Nicaea as booty after the defeat of Mithridates and brought him back to Rome.<sup>34</sup> The date would be either 73 or 66/65 (Mithridates suffered defeat on both occasions). Cinna's acquisition of Parthenius had important consequences for Latin poetry. Parthenius did not introduce Alexandrian poetry to Rome as scholars once believed, but he almost surely had a great influence on Cinna and through him on the other neoterics. He certainly also influenced Cornelius Gallus and Vergil in the next generation.

Parthenius' learned style and poetic tastes seem to have left their mark especially on Cinna's most famous poem, *Zmyrna*, of which only a few fragments are preserved.<sup>35</sup> The work, which was so difficult that it soon required a commentary, told the story of the heroine Zmyrna and her incestuous union with her father that produced the beautiful Adonis. Catullus celebrates it in poem 95.<sup>36</sup>

Zmyrna mei Cinnae nonam post denique messem      1  
     quam coepta est nonamque edita post hiemem,  
     milia cum interea quingenta *Atrianus in*<sup>37</sup> uno  
     . . . .  
 Zmyrna cavas Satrachi penitus mittetur ad undas,      5  
     Zmyrnam cana diu saecula pervolvent.  
 At Volusi annales Paduam morientur ad ipsam  
     et laxas scombris saepe dabunt tunicas.  
 Parva mei mihi sint cordi monimenta <*sodalis*>,<sup>38</sup>  
     at populus tumido gaudeat Antimacho. (95)      10

(The *Zmyrna* of my friend Cinna, published at last, nine harvests and winters after it was begun—although meanwhile the man of Atria [has written] five hundred thousand [verses] in a single [year]—*Zmyrna* will be sent to the deep channeled waters of the Satrachus; future ages, white-haired, will long unroll *Zmyrna*. But the *Annales* of Volusius will die right at the river Po and will often furnish loose wrappers for mackerel. Let the small works of my [friend] be dear to my heart, but let the rabble take pleasure in swollen Antimachus.)

Catullus' poem is a literary manifesto of the neoteric program, which it presents in the form of contrasts.<sup>39</sup> It opposes careful writing to sloppy



writing, distant rivers to local ones, literary immortality to ignominious obscurity, short works to long, an informed audience to an ignorant one, and—above all—good poets to bad. Cinna worked on *Zmyrna* for nine years, Catullus tells us, while the man of Atria (Volusius) produced half a million verses in a single day or month or year.<sup>40</sup> Cinna's work will travel as far as the river Satrachus in Cyprus (*Zmyrna's* home) and be read for generations, but Volusius' *Annals* will perish at his native Po, and its sheets will be used for fish wrap. Catullus caps the argument with a statement of his own taste, again in the form of an opposition: his friend's short poems are dear to him; the mob can have the notoriously long-winded Greek poet Antimachus.

Cinna's *Zmyrna* was a tale of bizarre and criminal love. Such stories were popular with Hellenistic poets, and Parthenius had a good supply of them: in the next generation he produced a prose collection of plot summaries he called *Erotica Pathemata* ("Misfortunes in Love") to provide material for the poetry of Cornelius Gallus. Stories of this kind were often the subject of poetic narrative in a genre modern scholars call "epyllion" ("miniature epic"). The epyllion seems to have been the essential neoteric genre: a poem in dactylic hexameter, the meter of epic, but on an "unepic" subject, a story of unhappy love with emphasis on a heroine and her emotional condition. We have fragments of Cinna's *Zmyrna* and Calvus' *Io*, and know the names of a few possible epyllia by other poets. But Catullus' poem 64 is the only surviving example from this period. The poem tells the stories of two sets of lovers, embedding one within the other: the story of Theseus and Ariadne is framed by the marriage of Peleus and Thetis. It is discussed in Chapter 6.

The neoteric poets also shared other genres. If it is fair to hazard a guess from the tiny number of neoteric fragments, Calvus and Catullus seem to have been closest in their choice of genres. In addition to epyllia, both poets composed epithalamia (marriage songs), wrote love poetry, and attacked Caesar and his friends with invective. The most general feature of neoteric poetry, however, was its preoccupation with poetic style. We shall have more to say about Catullus' style in later chapters. For now it is enough to note that style was important on both the macroscopic and the microscopic level: poetry had to be elegant, "urbane," polished, and carefully wrought, and it needed to demonstrate minute attention to structure, vocabulary, word order, and rhythm. Poets conforming to these ideals were praised, as Catullus praises Cinna for the *Zmyrna* or Cinna praises Aratus for the *Phaenomena* (fragment 11 Courtney) and glorifies Valerius Cato for *Dictynna* (fragment 14 Courtney).

Failures like Suffenus and Volusius were convicted of both a literary and a social sin: lack of *urbanitas*:

at vos interea venite in ignem,  
 pleni ruris et inficetiarum  
 annales Volusi, cacata carta. (36.18–20)  
 (But as for you, come into the fire,  
 full of rusticity and clumsiness,  
 Annals of Volusius, shitty sheets.)

### Conclusion

We know much more about the times he lived in than we do about Catullus himself. For Catullus we have only a few secure facts: that he was born near Verona around 84 B.C. to a wealthy and well-connected family, that he served on the staff of a provincial governor in 57/56, that he was a major figure in the group of poets who set Roman poetry on a new course in the late Republic, that he insulted Caesar (and was forgiven for it), that he had an affair with Clodia, that his brother died, and that he himself died at around the age of thirty. Catullus lived in one of the most exciting and interesting periods in Roman history, the end of the Roman Republic; and his poems, so far as we can tell, are all to be dated to its last decade. His poetry is deeply imbedded in that time and place—in its politics, society, sexual mores, and literary ideas—and we need to know his world as well as we can if we are to understand a single poem. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that although his poems reflect his time, they do not chronicle it. And conversely, that although knowing about his time gives us access to his poetry, it does not explain it or let us see into the inmost heart of Catullus himself.

Understanding Catullus' historical context is an essential beginning, but it is only a beginning. In the rest of this book we will be concerned with the context but also—and primarily—with the literary aspects of his poetry.

### Notes

- 1 Gruen, "Cicero and Licinius Calvus," 218–21.
- 2 Mamurra is attacked by himself under the obscene nickname *Mentula* ("Prick") in several epigrams: poems 94, 105, 114, 115. For *mentula* as

- obscene, see Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 9–12. Here and elsewhere I follow Richlin in translating it as “prick” (*The Garden of Priapus*, 18).
- 3 Wiseman, “The Masters of Sirmio.” Wiseman is followed by Thomson in his commentary on 31 and Skinner, *Catullus in Verona*, xxi–xxii.
  - 4 Wiseman, “The Masters of Sirmio,” 335 n. 3l.
  - 5 See Wiseman, *Catullan Questions*, 50–60.
  - 6 Wiseman, “Catullus, His Life and Times,” 167.
  - 7 Wiseman considers it “not absurd” to date all the poems between 57 and 54 (“Catullus, His Life and Times,” 167). Skinner believes that the clustering suggests “that Catullus’ working life in Rome was relatively brief” and that poems not referring to events in the capital may have been written elsewhere (*Catullus in Verona*, xxi).
  - 8 See Tatum, *The Patrician Tribune. Publius Clodius Pulcher*.
  - 9 For example: Memmius (governor of Bithynia) in poems 10 and 28; Vatinius (an important ally first of the triumvirate and later of Clodius, and subsequently prosecuted by Calvus) in 14, 52, and 53; Piso (governor of Spain) in 28 and 47; Mamurra (Caesar’s henchman) in 29, 57, 94, 105, 114, 115. For Vatinius see Gruen, “Cicero and Licinius Calvus,” 217–21. Piso is unidentified; Wiseman suggests that he might be L. Piso Frugi (“Catullus, His Life and Times,” 163). Catullus also mentions contemporaries who were active in both literature and politics: most notably Calvus (14, 50, 53, 96) and Cinna (10, 95, 113). For the identification of historical figures mentioned in the poems, see Neudling, *A Prosopography to Catullus*.
  - 10 Gruen, “Cicero and Licinius Calvus,” 215.
  - 11 Wiseman, *Catullus and His World*, 107–10.
  - 12 Wiseman, “The Masters of Sirmio,” 343–6.
  - 13 E.g., Tatum, “Friendship, Politics, and Literature,” 494; Fitzgerald, *Catullan Provocations*, 9–10; Wray, *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood*, 45–6.
  - 14 For a good modern discussion, see Fitzgerald, *Catullan Provocations*, 88–93.
  - 15 Winterbottom in a review of Ramage, *Urbanitas. Ancient Sophistication and Refinement: Classical Review* 26 (1976): 59.
  - 16 Catullus does not use the word *urbanitas*; in addition to 22, *urbanus* appears at 39.8 and 10 (the Spaniard Egnatius is not *urbanus*, and neither is his habit of smiling at the wrong time) and very interestingly at 57.3 (where Caesar and Mamurra are tainted with equal stains, the one an “urban” stain, the other a stain from Formio).
  - 17 Segal, “Catullan ‘Otiosi’: The Lover and the Poet.”
  - 18 *In Catilinam* 2.22–4; *Pro Caelio* 35 (accusations made against Caelius, but tacitly accepted by Cicero).
  - 19 See, esp., Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 192–7, 212–14; Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*, 63–84.

- 20 Wiseman, *Catullus and His World*, 9–14.
- 21 Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus*.
- 22 Wiseman, “Catullus 16,” 14–15.
- 23 Wiseman, *Catullus and His World*, 11; Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*, 196.
- 24 Fantham, “*Stuprum*: Public Attitudes and Penalties for Sexual Offences in Republican Rome”; Skinner, *Sexuality*, 199–200.
- 25 A famous passage from Cato the elder is often quoted: “If you caught your wife in adultery you could kill her with impunity according to law, but she would not dare lay a finger on you if you committed adultery, nor is it the law” (Cato, *Orat.* 222, Malcovati). In fact, however, there are no known examples of husbands or fathers killing the adulterous wife or daughter. Divorce was the usual solution. See Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality*, 41. Female adultery became a criminal offence under Augustus’ marriage laws of 18 B.C. (Fantham, “*Stuprum*,” 267; Skinner, *Sexuality*, 206–7).
- 26 Skinner, “Clodia Metelli,” with earlier bibliography. For a complementary treatment, see Wiseman, *Catullus and His World*, 15–53.
- 27 Scholars have taken the word “neoteric” (literally, “younger” or “more recent”) from Cicero in a letter to his friend Atticus (50 B.C.). After a verse parodying the style of contemporary poetry, he says: “Peddle this spondaic line as your own to anyone you like of the *neoterói* (‘more recent [poets]’)” (*Letters to Atticus* 7.2.1).
- 28 There is a very large bibliography on this subject. Among the most important discussions are Quinn, *The Catullan Revolution*, 19–26; Fordyce, *Catullus. A Commentary*, xviii–xxii; Lyne, “The Neoteric Poets”; Clausen, “Callimachus and Latin Poetry” and “Catullus and Callimachus”; Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext*, 74–83. See also Courtney, “The New Poets” in *The Fragmentary Latin Poets*, 189–91, as well as his discussions of individual poets.
- 29 Kubiak, “The Orion Episode of Cicero’s *Aratea*.”
- 30 For such a poetry game between Catullus and Calvus in poem 50, see Chapter 6, pages 210–16. Burgess, “Catullus c. 50: The Exchange of Poetry.”
- 31 See Courtney, *The Fragmentary Latin Poets*, 207–9.
- 32 For Catullus’ meters, see Chapter 4. Fragment 15 can be the first half of either a hexameter or a pentameter; fragment 16 is a pentameter.
- 33 The story is told by Plutarch (*Life of Brutus*, 20). See Wiseman, *Cinna the Poet*, 44–58.
- 34 The Byzantine encyclopedia *Suda* says in its entry for Parthenius: “He was taken as booty by Cinna when the Romans defeated Mithridates; then he was set free because of his learning.”
- 35 The fragments of Parthenius have been edited with a commentary and translation by Lightfoot, *Parthenius of Nicaea*. For an older edition and translation, see Gaselee in the Loeb volume of *Daphnis and Chloë*

- and Parthenius. For *Zmyrna*, see Cinna, fragments 6–8 in Courtney, *The Fragmentary Latin Poets*, 218–20.
- 36 In some texts, including Mynors', 95.9–10 are separated from 95 and printed as 95b. Thomson includes the verses with 95. See also Goold's edition and Courtney (*The Fragmentary Latin Poets*, 230).
- 37 The manuscripts and most modern editions read *Hortensius*. I print *Atrianus in*, following Courtney's suggestion (*The Fragmentary Latin Poets*, 231). *Atrianus* ("man of Atria," a town on the Po) points to Volusius, mentioned by name in line 7. For discussion, see Courtney and Solodow, "On Catullus 95."
- 38 Angle brackets indicate an addition by the editors.
- 39 For more on poem 95 as a demonstration of neoteric principles, see Clausen, "Callimachus and Latin Poetry," 188–91.
- 40 In the translation I have supplied "year" for the word agreeing with *uno* that would have appeared in the missing verse 4.