



SELECTIONS
FROM
CATULLUS

Translations by C. John Holcombe

ocaso press 2010

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from
Catullus

Colin John Holcombe

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Introduction

Gaius Valerius Catullus was born in Verona around 84 BC. His father was wealthy and distinguished, owning a villa at Sirmio, and entertaining Julius Caesar when the great man was governor of Gaul. The poet went to Rome in 61 BC, where he fell in love with the 'Lesbia' of his poems, very probably Clodia, a member of the aristocratic Claudian family and the wife of Q. Caecilius Metellus Celer. The fascinating but rapacious woman soon tired of her young lover, but he worked his rapture and despair into some of the finest of Latin poetry. Catullus was also attracted to men, and wrote several poems for them.

In 57 BC Catullus went to Bithynia on the staff of Memmius, governor of the province. On his return a year later he probably travelled via the Troad to perform burial rites for his brother, who had died on service in the east. Thereafter Catullus seems to have lived in Rome, in comfort if not luxury at his villa near Tibur, which is modern Tivoli. Many acquaintances are mentioned in his poems, but we know very little of his everyday life. By 54 BC he was probably dead.

Catullus belonged to the 'neoterói' or new Roman poets drawing inspiration and technique from Alexandrian Greek models. The 114 poems extant derive from a single manuscript, and are very mixed, ranging from the witty, brilliant and moving, to the indifferent and unnecessarily obscene. Their arrangement seems an editorial convenience. The first 60 are lyrics in various meters. Poems 61-4 are long pieces modelled on those of the learned Greek scholar-poets of Alexandria. Poems 65-116 are in the elegiac metre but epigrams, i.e. short poems on a wide variety of topic.

Adding to the confusion of this unhelpful grouping is the very uneven quality of the work. For long sections Catullus can write with searing brilliance, but many poems are trivial and overcharged with obscenity or bluntness of humour that is more Roman than ours. A collection that contained only the first rate would be a slim volume, and I have therefore adopted a policy that:

- includes the celebrated pieces,

- displays the range of Catullus's work, which extends to some indifferent poems,
- renders chosen poems in their entirety, generally translated line for line,
- reworks the original into decent English verse, occasionally adding shaping features not found in the original,
- groups poems into coherent themes.

The policy selects only one third of poems, but two thirds of the text.

Some renderings are a little free, but Catullus is not a poet that can be always translated word-for-word, and his language is not generally that of contemporary speech. There are many translations in the current style of free verse that follow a more literal approach, but they are not poetry and turn the obscenities into lavatory graffiti.

I have kept the notes to a bare minimum as this is not a work of scholarship. My aim was renderings that work as English poems. Catullus at his best is incomparable, and that passion, inspired craftsmanship and seeming spontaneity cannot be replicated in English, or not in a reasonably close translation. I have therefore opted for a terse and lucid style in iambic metre that I hope brings out some of the poetry.

The order has been rearranged to make a sensible whole. Most readers believe the passionate Lesbia poems are early work, written before Catullus left for Bithynia, and that the longer pieces came later. The poems I have grouped under 'After Lesbia' clearly depict love's pain and recrimination, but we cannot know how much afterwards they were written or rewritten. The concluding group is my choice, made to round off the selection appropriately. I have noted the original metres, which unhappily demonstrate how limited is English verse by comparison.

DEDICATION

Carmen 1

Whom else could I present little book
to, all the roughness pumiced off
but you, Cornelius, once kind enough
to think these little trifles worth your time?
You — whose three great books, of all Italian
work, display the wisdom of mankind:
the fruit of Jupiter and endless toil —
I ask to take this effort as your own,
when, so protected by the virgin Muse,
it may then live, and last, more lives than one.

Note

Cornelius Nepos (c. 94-24 BC) was famous for his historical works, but also wrote light verse. The dedication may well have introduced the collection in the original manuscript, and is written in the hendesyllabic metre (eleven syllables, divided into five feet).

LESBIA

Carmen 51

He seems to me a god or, if
that's possible, still more divine,
that other in your company
who sees and hears

you laughing softly. Sense at once
is snatched away when next to you,
and, Lesbia, in my mouth
there is no voice.

My tongue is quelled, and subtle fire
flows down my limbs; my ears are filled
with siren uproar: dark eyes burn
twice black as night.

Your sloth, Catullus, that's to blame,
the idleness that flourishes
in kings and wealthy cities: makes them
desolate.

Note

An adaptation of a Greek poem by Sappho. If Lesbia is indeed Clodia, sister of P. Clodius Pulcher, then the 'other' may be her husband, Q. Caecilius Metellus Celer. The Latin text is in Sapphic stanzas.

Carmen 86

Quintia's stateliness is known to many. She
is white and tall, which I accept.
Yet not a trace I find of charm and taste
in someone so much statuesque.
But Lesbia's truly beautiful in all she has
appropriated from the rest.

Note

Quintia's identity is not known.

Carmen 2a

Sparrow, plaything of my mistress,
whom, delighting in, she warms
at breast, or gives her little finger
to, though hard you bite at times,
as hungry as my mistress is
when love is shining in her. You
can turn that longing into play
and consolation. Could I toy
with you when passion wanes, you'd be
a balm for my unhappiness.

Note

Probably written early in Catullus' relationship with Lesbia.

Carmen 2b

At last and pleasurably it's come to me
as golden apples to that long-legged girl
who stopped and loosed that long-tied girdle.

Note

The manuscript shows no break between 2a and 2b, but the two have different themes. Both are written in the hendecasyllabic metre. The long-

legged girl is Atalanta, who lost the running contest to Milanion by stopping to pick up golden apples he had placed on the track: suitors who lost the match were put to death.

Carmen 3

Mourn, you Venuses and Cupids,
you who care for lovely things.
The sparrow of my girl has gone,
the plaything of my friend is dead
though dearer to her than her eyes.
Sweet as sugar was the bird
she knew as mother does her child.
It never stirred far from her lap
but flitted round from this and that
and chirped as though for her alone.

Now sent upon that shadowed road
from which it's said can none return,
the fault is yours, dark Orcus shades,
devouring every lovely thing,
who took from me a pretty sparrow.
The crime has made my girl's eyes red
and filled her swelling look with tears.

Note

A companion piece to 2A, also in the hendecasyllabic metre.

Carmen 5

Let us live, my Lesbia, in our love
despite what fierce old men will say. For us
their ancient saws may count as nought. It's true
the sun that sets today will rise again,
but once its transient light is spent
there comes enforcement of an endless night.
So give me then a thousand kisses, give
a hundred thousand, hundred more. Heap on
those brief confusions that continually
the many senseless things we may have done
are lost in one, and therefore never spell
the whole — for then an evil eye may count
the sum, and curse us with what kisses were.

Note

A famous piece, written in the hendesyllabic metre, and here a little freely rendered in the last half.

Carmen 109

You swear, who are my all in life, our love
will make us happy, and forever.
May gods ensure she truly means those words,
without dishonesty, and from the heart,
that in our living to the very end, this sacred
bond of friendship will go on.

Note

In the elegiac metre, as all poems are after Carmen 64.

Carmen 7

Why would you ask me, Lesbia, to count
how many of your kisses make enough?
That sum is more than are the Libyan sands
that fill Cyrene of the powerful drug,
or lie between the oracle of Jove
and holy tomb of old Battiades.
They're more than glimmering stars when night is still
and looks down on the stolen loves of men.
Such and countless more are not enough
to please this wild Catullus, nor can serve
to be enumerated by our spies
who'd cast through them an evil eye on us.

Note

Lydia is north Africa, and held the important Saharan oracle of Jove. Cyrene is a port midway between Alexandria and Tunis, the birthplace of Callimachus, to whom Battiades also refers. The powerful drug is the silphium, an antispasmodic plant that grew there. The original is in the hendesyllabic metre.

Carmen 83

Lesbia slanders me to her man's face,
and he, the idiot, makes fun of this,
and so not noticing our mutual joy.
All that changed: she snarls and interrupts,
which means I count for something, and, the more
she burns with passion for me, so she talks.

Note

If her man is her husband, Q. Caecilius Metellus Celer, the poem will have been written before 59 BC, when her husband died.

Carmen 85

Why love and hate? you ask. I do not know, but still
I feel it and it tortures me.

Note

Another celebrated piece, more telling in the original Latin.

Carmen 87

No woman truthfully can say that she was loved
as much as Lesbia was by me,
and never treaty was more bound by faith than that
which binds me in my love for you.

THE BITHYNIAN YEAR

Carmen 46

The spring returns its frozen warmth,
and now the equinoctial rage
is soft with happy Zephyr's breath.
Catullus, leave the Phrygian
fields and sweltering hot Nicaea,
and chose the famous Asian cities
where your yearning seeks to go,
anticipation strengthening feet.
A long farewell to friends collected
from the far ends of the earth and sent
now back on their diverging roads.

Note

Probably written in 56 BC when Catullus prepared to return home from service in Bithynia (north-west Asia Minor). Phrygia is west central Anatolia. Nicaea is modern Iznik in Turkey. Original in the hendecasyllabic metre.

Carmen 101

Over many seas and peoples I have come,
brother, bearing these sad funeral offerings,
to make a last obeisance to the dead
as though my breath could stir the silent ashes.
Since your going drew the very breath
of living from me I still mourn the loss,
but bring, obeying parents' ancient customs,
these gifts the living owe the dead. Receive
them, brother. For all time, with flowing tears,
I here salute you as I say farewell.

Note

The brother died on service in the Troad (north-west corner of Asia Minor),

and here Catullus probably travelled after his year in Bithynia (central Asia Minor). Original elegiac metre rendered as blank verse.

Carmen 31: Sirmio

Dearest of islands and peninsulas
of standing waters or the boundless seas —
for both the glittering sea god Neptune holds —
how willingly, Sirmio, I come you you.
I scarce believe I've left the plains of Thynia
and Bithynians to safely reach you here.
What blessedness to lay aside old cares,
and come, mind burdened with its travelling,
at such a cost, wearily, to our own home,
and take again our ever-longed-for bed,
alone the recompense for all our toils.
So hear me, Sirmio, and let your joy
replenish mine, and laughing Lydian waves
repeat the raucous laughter in this house.

Note

Another celebrated piece that has been much translated and adapted. Sirmio is modern Sirmione, an isthmus projecting into Lake Garda, where Catullus's father owned a villa. Original in the choliambic metre.

AFTER LESBIA

Carmen 8

Enough, Catullus, of this foolishness.
What's seen as over has indeed gone by.
How brightly shone the days for you when drawn
towards that girl of yours on whom your love
will not in like amount again be given.
So many pleasures that were wished by you
she was not too slow to answer with: they all
are gone, those long and ever shining days.
She's ended them, and you in turn should be
opposed to chase what only runs to make you
miserable. Be strong, stand fast, and let
Catullus say farewell: now for his girl
he'll no more ask and seek humiliation.
But you will grieve when no one asks you what
it means to go on now: for why, poor girl?
What matter who submits and loves those looks,
who now is worthy of your love and vows?
What matter kisses, or whose lip's you'll bite,
if strong Catullus show he does not care?

Carmen 58

Caelius: our Lesbia, this Lesbia,
the only one Catullus has adored
beyond his person or his family,
now gives herself at crossroads and in alley-
ways to all good Roman sons.

Note

Original metre of Carmen 8 is the choliambic, and that of Carmen 58 is the hendecasyllable.

Carmen 70

No man she'd sooner love than me, she says,
supposing even Jupiter would court her.
So woman says to every ardent lover:
words writ of flowing water and the wind.

Note

The elegiac metre is here rendered as blank verse.

Carmen 72

Lesbia, favouring Catullus — so
you said — would not let Jupiter come first.
And you I prized was not a casual love
but as a father loves his family.
But now I know you, and must burn the more,
I rank you as the lower, lighter worth.
How is this possible? Because my pain
ensures I love you more but like you less.

Note

Original in the elegiac metre, rendered here as blank verse.

Carmen 76.

If man is pleased remembering good deeds
and thinks himself redeemed by piety,
his faith upheld, and free of any contract
made with the deceiving gods, then much
of happiness remains to you, Catullus,
a long life left by that ungrateful love.
Whatever men can truly say or do
to others has been done and said by you.
When all entrusted to a thankless heart
is lost, why must you further scourge yourself?
Why won't you harden thoughts, and be yourself
and not some wretch afflicted by the gods?
If difficult to give up what we loved
then more the necessary: in this way
lies true salvation, to be tried by you
as whether possible or out of reach.
The Gods have always pity, and have brought,
if any could, their help at point of death:
I ask them look at me, and, if my life
is pure, remit this malady, this pain
that, like paralysis, eats up my limbs
and drives out happiness from this whole heart.
I do not ask she love me openly, or,
since impossible, that she be chaste,
but for my health: to give up foul disease
and find the duties, gods, that I did once.

Note

Elegiac metre rendered as blank verse.

Carmen 11

Furius and Aurelius,
my friends: although Catullus go
as far as India where the waves
resound along that eastern shore,
among Hyrcanians or the Arabs,
the Scythian or Parthian bowmen,
or where the seven-headed Nile,
disgorging, stains the level sea,
or, climbing in the highest Alps
will see great Caesar's monuments,
the waters of the Gallic Rhine
or customs of the savage Britons —
whatever be the will of Heaven,
accepting this, as everything —
I'd say to her, advisedly,
in words she'll see the import of:
collect adulterers and take
three hundred of them in your arms
and though there's never love,
grind loin on loin, but do not look
again for that deep love I gave,
that by her fault is as the flower
of meadowside the passing plough
but touches once to lop off bloom.

Note

The identities of Furius and Aurelius are not known, though the former may possibly be Furius Bibaculus. Hyrcania is the wild country immediately south of the Caspian Sea, Parthia is Persia and the Scythians were nomadic peoples who lived on the eastern shores of the Black Sea. The original is in Sapphic stanzas.

THE ROMAN POET

Carmen 68

You sent a letter to me, wrought of tears
from one suppressed by heavy fate, supposing
I could snatch you from the dead, or lift you,
shipwrecked, from the foaming waves. I'm one
whom Venus sends not to a gentle sleep
but friendlessness and single bed, no ease
in hearing songs the ancient poets spoke:
all night awake and with an anxious mind.

It pleases me to hear you name me friend,
and call up gifts of Venus and the Muses,
but Manius, in case you do not know
my ills, or think I would short-change a guest,
I'll tell you of the troubles I am in,
lest hope seek riches from a wretched man.

When first they dressed me in my boyhood robe,
and youth was springtime with its happy flowers,
I played in earnestness and knew the goddess
mixing toil of work with inner joy.

But then there came the grief of brother's death,
my studies overwhelmed in that great loss.
My brother, you in dying wrecked our hopes,
with you the house itself was straightway sunk,
and all our joys together plunged in grief,
for you it was that made the daytime sweet.
In consequence I turned away from studies,
and took no pleasure henceforth in the mind.

So when you say you find it shameful that
Catullus keeps his quarters in Verona,
that someone so well known would hide himself,
and warm his cold limbs in an empty bed.
Remember, Manius, my grief is great,

and pardon me I'm not more giving: what
I would bestow on you my state restricts:
I have no writers with me now: for that
we live in Rome, while here my house is cold
and comfortless. My time is spent in following
one scroll in many I still count mine.
So do not think I show you ill intent,
or lack a notion of true noble feeling.
On you, no other, I would lavish riches,
and what I had, the whole, it would be yours.

Note

A poem written as a reply to Manius who has sought Catullus' help over pressing difficulties. Here the original elegiac metre has been rendered as blank verse.

Carmen 17

Colonia, that wants a decent bridge
to saunter on, can only see instead
how rickety supports and rotting planks
must plunge the passing stranger in the mud.
On one condition I'd support you: bear
the weight of Salisubsalus's rites.
So you, Colonia, can split your sides
the moment fool of townsman tumbles off,
and not from any section but the place
where mud is thickest and will stink the most.
This bumpkin, innocent as dandled two-
year old, is married to a green-leafed girl
(who's frolicsome as is the new year goat,
and so needs guarding like the choicest grapes).
But still he lets her play about, and doesn't
care, not in the least, lies dead in ditch
as alder felled by the Ligurian axe.
For him the pregnant dangers don't exist.
This clod of townsman, and all seeing, sees
and hears no hazards round him, and in fact

I doubt he even knows himself alive.
So pitch him headfirst from your bridge, that might
just jolt him out of doltish ignorance,
and leave his thoughts sunk in the mire below
as is a mule's shoe shed into the mud.

Note

Original in the priapean metre. Colonia is a small town near Verona.

Carmen 45

Septimus, there holding his beloved Acme
on his lap, said 'Acme, if I do
not love you desperately, and so forever,
which is continually, through all the years,
and more than anyone was loved before,
may I in Libyan or the Indian desert
face a lion with its fierce green eyes.'
And as he said this, Love was on the left
and at the right hand sneezed in his approval.
So Acme, softly bending back her head,
then kissed the boy's intoxicated eyes,
with those full rosy lips of hers, and said,
'In such a way my darling Septimus
we'll be obedient to our one great master.
For in me is a sharper, more consuming
fire that burns into my marrow bones.'
With that appeared Love on the left again
and at the right hand sneezed in his approval.
And having started with this pleasing omen,
their souls united, and they loved each other,
and Septimus in love desired his Acme
more than Syria or the far Britannia.
And from her Septimus the faithful Acme
derived her mutual pleasure and desires.
Who sees in this wide world more holy creatures,
or love more favourable than Venus blessed?

Note

Acme and Septimus are otherwise unknown: the metre is the hendesyllabic.

Carmen 35

Papyrus, I wish you'd tell the friend
that's close to me, Caecilius the poet,
to quit the Larian shores and from the walls
of Novum Comum come to my Verona.
Certain thoughts I have to offer him, for both
his counsel and a friend's. Please make him wise
to leave, immediately devour the road
for all a thousand times some glittering beauty
call him back, and, having her two arms
entwined about his neck, entreat him stay.
But that's commendable if tales be true.
Uncontrollably, and more than life
itself, she loves his 'Mistress Dindymus'.
Unfinished though it is, it eats her bones.
For which I must forgive you, girl, who seem
to have acquired the Sapphic muse. The charm
of work begun but yet unfinished shows
Earth Mother favours my Caecilius.

Note

Nothing more is known of Caecilius: the metre is the hendesyllabic.

Carmen 10

My dear friend Varus led me from the Forum,
where I was idling, to his mistress: charming
creature as she surely was, not much
amiss in manners or in looks. We fell
to talking, casually, of this and that,
then of Bithynia, what sort of place
I found out there, and how its prospects stood,
and was I richer for the enterprise?
I told her what was true, that none of them,
not soldiers, praetor or his staff, could find
a way to come back fatter than they went,

especially when our Memmius, that slick-haired Praetor, had no care for subalterns.
Well, anyway, she said, you must have got some bearers for your chair, since there they're bred.
At which, no doubt to show myself a man in some ways more advantaged than the rest, I told her my affairs went well enough, but in that god-forsaken province I could not obtain four pairs of strapping fellows.
'So there we are', I said, 'there isn't one who brandishes the strength to even hoist a sofa's broken leg upon his shoulder.'
'Ah, Catullus, she said, the little minx, then lend me several of your slaves: I'm off this moment to the temple of Serapis.'
'You are? In that case', I was pleased to tell her, 'what I said now isn't true. Just why escapes me, but in fact, my friend, the man who has them now is Gaius Cinna though, frankly, I'm indifferent to the matter, often treating them as still my own. But you're a silly creature to impose on one it's never good to trifle with.'

Note

A casual piece in the hendesyllabic metre written in colloquial language. Memmius is the governor of Bithynia, under whom Catullus served for a year. Varus may be Quintilius Varus, a friend of Horace and Vergil.

Carmen 55

We ask you, if not over troublesome,
to let us know what haunts your shade frequents.
For I have sought you in the Campus Minor,
in the Circus, all the bookshops too.
I've even sought you in the Portico
of Magnus, in the shrine of mighty Jove.
I gathered all the girls who might have known

but each was ignorant, her face a blank.
I said, 'Now come on, show Camerius',
when one at that undid her tunic, said,
'Ah, see, he's hiding in my rose-tipped breasts!'

A task of Hercules to bear with you:
whence comes this proud evasion, friend?
Why can't you tell us what your haunts are now,
and trust our judgment and the light of day?
Sequestered, are you, with a milk-white girl?
I see your tongue will hold its peace,
so I will tell you, friend, to give up love,
for Venus dotes upon loquacious speech.
But still I'll let you keep your mouth shut tight
if you will make me partner with your love.

Note

The reference to Pompey's Portico suggest the poem was written no earlier than 55 BC. The identity of Camerius is not known. Line 9 is incomplete or corrupt in the original, and the metre is hendesyllabic.

Carmen 57

They fit so perfectly, these famous perverts:
the fawning Mamurra, priapic Caesar.
But there's no wonder in it, here at home
with one from Formia and one from Rome.
Each stains the other, and these marks proclaim
them both diseased, as twinned the same
as learning holds them to the selfsame couch.
They share their little girls, and both will vouch
the other's appetite is just a teaser.
They fit so perfectly, these famous perverts.

Note

An attack on Mamurra and Julian Caesar, written in the hendesyllabic metre. Formia is a town in Latium.

Carmen 71

How fittingly can both undo: the first a smell
of underarms, the second gout.

Miraculously your rival's gained them both, but soon
your sweetheart cries she's had enough.

How good to think that when they fornicate, the goat
smell knocks her back, and he has gout.

Note

Possibly a jibe at M. Caelius Rufus.

Carmen 97

No difference, gods preserve us, does it make to sniff
Aemilius's rump or mouth

The last is no less filthy than the first, while buttocks
look the neater, lacking teeth,

which in the mouth protrude a foot or more from gums
as shaky as an old box cart.

The mouth you see is like that hairy fold a pissing
mule lets hang when she's on heat.

And as for dalliance, his boasted charm, more deft
is plodding donkey at a mill,

and any girl he might approach would sooner hug
her hangman and lick out his arse.

Note

*Aemilius may be L. Aemilius Paulus, consul in 50 BC and (despite
Catullus's scorn) a successful ladies man.*

Carmen 16

I'll fuck you in the mouth and anus, queer
Aurelius and queening Furius.
You've plumbed me in my verses, have you? Found
me too voluptuous, not chaste enough?
Though pious in his civic life, the poet
must in writing let the passions flow,
providing there is charm and wit in what's
arousing or lascivious. In truth
it's not the boys but hairy men I hurt
who have no action from their stiffened parts.
And if you think the thousand kisses I
have written of must make me not a man,
just let me fuck you in the mouth and butt.

Note

Original is in the hendesyllabic metre.

Carmen 114

Truly Mentula the rich at Firnum has his
pastures full of everything:
fowling, fishing, well-ploughed fields and game — except
that costs outdo the revenue.
So let us call him rich in nought, praise lands the while
the man himself remain in want.

Note

Mentula refers to Mamurra, Caesar's chief engineer in Gaul, who made an earlier fortune in the service of Pompey, but the word also means 'prick' or penis. Firnum is on the Adriatic coast of Italy.

Character assassination was part of the rough and tumble of Roman political life, and Catullus without his passions and invective would not be the poet we know. Romans were also franker than us in referring to bodily functions, and there existed a long tradition of obscene verses in Latin.

IN THE ALEXANDRIAN STYLE

Carmen 61

Urania's offspring, you who've gone
and left the slopes of Helicon
to carry off the maid to man:
hear how hymen song began
with Hymenaeus.

Don the marriage veil, with brows
that bear the pungent marjoram flowers.
Have your snow-white feet to wear
their saffron slippers and repair
in haste to us.

Awakened to this happy day,
our wedding songs will not delay.
Let your dancing shake the ground
that the pinewood torch be found
to flare with light.

Junia's come with good intent
to Manlius, as Venus sent
the Phrygian, her arbiter
and gave him in Idalia,
her choicest gift.

5. So let the Asian myrtle flower
on branches where the dewy power
of Hamadryads drink the air
with self-delighting, far from care
of humankind.

For them let all approach be banned
that does not leave the Thespian land:
not Aonian cave in cliff
but more the Aganippe nymph
who haunts clear streams.

Call the new bride to the house
who waits the coming of her spouse.
Twine thoughts with tenderness as will
entangling ivy take its fill
of tree held fast.

Sing, you virgins, of the day
when hymen too will guide your way.
Sing in tune our wedding song
that in turn their day be long,
O Hymenaeus.

Hear us, whom we call by name
to give the service we proclaim,
come in gladness as we ask,
perform for us the solemn task:
bind each to each.

10. Tell me who is sought as much
as this god is, and so can touch
our hearts more readily than he?
So sing of hymen as we see
this Hymenaeus.

It's you the father will invoke,
to you the trembling bride unyoke
the ties that fasten up her dress,
and you the waiting groom address
his fervent speech.

It's you who lead the flowered bride
from her caring mother's side
to the young man's novice arms.
Hymeneal are your charms,
O Hymenaeus.

Nothing's done without your power,
so, Venus, give us to this hour.
Let it be as you declare.
What god exists that we should dare
exalt to you?

A house without you lacks a son,
and what can parent lean upon?
Let it be as you declare.
What god exists that we should dare
exalt to you?

15. A land that lacked your holy rites
is one of grievous oversights.
Let it be as you declare.
What god exists that we should dare
exalt to you?

Let your hands unbar the door.
The maid is present: have the floor
reflect the torches' splendid flame.

In modesty she may be slow
but wise men tell her she must go,
though weeping so.

Aurunculeia, no more tears:
for what in daylight brings its fears
that goddess rising from the wave
outdoes the comeliness you gave
to ocean's eyes.

Accustomed here to stand on worth
in the rich man's plot of earth,
so the hyacinthine flower.
Do not linger: late the hour.
New bride: come forth.

20. Display yourself, new bride, and hear
the testimony of honest ear.
See the torches' gold-lit hair
write inscriptions on the air.
New bride: come forth.

They do not light your way to harm:
devotion seeks no other's charm.
Shame it would be if confessed
that he from your sweet, tender breast
would sleep apart.

But as the vine draws close to tree
and binds continually, so he
within your rapture has his hold.
But now at length the day grows cold.
New bride: come forth.

Now open lies the wedding bed
to which your master's ever sped.
From night-time to the noon-day sky
such pleasure waits, but day goes by.
New bride: come forth.

Boys: lift the torches, bring to sight
the wedding veil in golden light.
To harmony your voices bring
as Hymen, Hymen you would sing.
Sing Hymenaeus.

25. Forgo no ribald wedding zest,
nor the Fescennine jest.
Let from boys no nuts be reft:
obediently the groom has left
his concubine.

Allow the boys their ribald stuff,
their play with walnuts is enough
to tell you, who were concubine,
your part is over, so resign
to boys their fruit.

However lusty, these were more
the women of the farmyard floor.
Abandoned here are all who toiled
to see your beard new trimmed and oiled:
how sad they are.

And how much will they criticize
the shaved and perfumed as he tries
to pass his former lover by,
but sing of Hymen Hymanae,
O Hymenaeus.

But what's allowed the single man
to reap what folly as he can,
is much prohibited when wed.
Hear the smiling wisdom said,
O Hymenaeus.

30. Grant your husband what is sought
or he will wander elsewhere, fraught
with many dangers for a bride.
Let our Hymenaeus guide,
O Hymenaeus.

See how dominant the house
of family and wealth of spouse.
Pray it ever serve you well
as to Hymen now you tell
your wedding vows.

Continually until there come
a drowsy age that's trembling, dumb,
and head that nods at everything:
Hymen Hymen you will sing
O Hymenaeus.

Bring good omens to the fold:
cross with ankles sheathed in gold
this household's hallowed, honest floor.
Singing, singing as before,
O Hymenaeus.

Gaze within: your look is led
to the groom's empurpled bed.
Impatiently he waits for you.
Let this Hymenaeus too
sing on to you.

35. No less than yours his breast conspires
to hide its ardent inner fires.
But what is hidden is for sure,
so sing this hymen song the more:
O Hymenaeus.

Young man, you'll let this shapely arm
of woman reach out and with charm
enlist her husband's bed, which long
will hear the sweet extended song,
O Hymenaeus.

Good women who have known of old
how girl defects to bridal fold,
arrange the matter as is just,
sing of Hymen as they must,
O Hymenaeus.

Let the bridegroom's manly grace
greet the bride's soft glowing face.
Flowered as the poppy, red,
or camomile and white the bed.
O Hymenaeus.

So he comes, does not delay
but bid as Venus who will say
without embarrassment what you
will hunger for, and which you do
when love inspires.

40. But to the husband now confess
that gods are like you, nothing less.
He is handsome, you are Venus:
so they will not, having seen us,
deny their help.

He who'd count your blessings will
outdo the dust of Africa, and still
discover your sweet actions lead
to millions more than millet seed
of glimmering stars.

Sport you as you will, but give,
and shortly, children as will live
as flowers of your pleasing line.
It is not fitting your design
should fail in this.

I want a young Torquatus stretch
out his tender hand and fetch
at once from father's face a smile
and from his mother's look the while
a loving glance.

Have his patrimony shown,
although this union stay unknown,
by his father's manly look
and his mother's airs that brook
no wantonness.

45. Let goodness of the female line
in abundant offspring shine:
Telemachus, show for good
Penelope's chaste widowhood
by candid face.

Shut the marriage-chamber doors:
virgins, you have sung our cause.
Let the newlyweds now give
their leaven to our song and live
in constant joy.

Note

Catullus wrote four poems in the Alexandrian style, i.e. lengthy, intricately wrought, and packed with artifice and allusions to the mythological past. In their various ways, all refer to the union of love, though perversely in Carmen 63.

Carmen 61 was written in honour of a certain Manlius Torquatus and Iunia Aurunculeia, who cannot now be positively identified. The short lines are woven with refrains, and are naturally a little free in this translation, which is shaped by added rhyme. The poem opens with an invocation to Hymen, the god of weddings, and then moves to the hesitant bride, who is to replace the groom's concubines. The groom receives some advice, and attention then reverts to the bride. The final section focuses on the bedchamber, and looks forward to the birth of an heir.

The metre is a little complicated (stanzas of four glyconics and one pherecratean) but the allusions are straightforward:

Verse 1. Urania: mother of Hymen, god of marriage. Helicon: sacred mountain in Boeotia, home to the Muses. Hymenaeus is the Greek god of

marriage.

Verse 4. Phrygian: Paris, who judged Venus to be the fairest. Idalia is in Cyprus and sacred to the goddess.

Verse 5. Hamadryads: tree nymphs.

Verse 6. Thespia: a settlement at the foot of Mount Helicon in Aonia (Boeotia). Aganippe is a nymph inhabiting the stream of that name.

Verse 25. Fescennine jest: bawdy, traditional in Roman weddings.

Verse 26. nuts / walnuts: another wedding ritual, perhaps signifying the end of childhood.

Verse 32. Hymen: Greek god of marriage.

Verse 38. camomile: allusion to virginity.

Verse 45. Telemachus: son of Odysseus and Penelope.

Carmen 63

When once that wave-borne ship had carried Attis
swiftly to the Phrygian grove, he straight
way sought the dark and circling woods in which
the goddess lived. His mind deranged, he cut
off testicles with sharpened stone, and stood
without the force of manhood on a ground
still spotted with his blood. He then took up
with snow-white hands the tabor, instrument,
of your famed rites, Earth Mother, Cybele.

10. His cautious fingers tapped the taut bull hide,
and, trembling, told the faithful sense its pulse:

*'Attend the grove of Cybele, and come
you cattle of our mistress Dindymus.*

*You seek, as exiles do, a foreign home,
and follow me, who am your leader now.*

*You've suffered hardship of a long sea journey
and shorn off Venus from your body, so
to gladden our great lady by the act.*

Now is no time for tardiness, but come

20. *to Cybele's, the sacred Phrygian's grove.*

*The cymbal resonates with humming drum,
and Phrygian flute is played from curving reed.*

*Ivy-crowned, the Maenads toss their maddened heads
their sacred rites accompanied by wails,*

and where the goddess will attend her rite

we'll haste ourselves with triple-quicken'd step.'

So sang the would-be woman to companions.

The wailing dancers followed the thiasus,
and cymbals mixed with tabor's music, when

30. the whole crowd surged on to the mount of Ida.

Exhausted, Attis with his instrument

directs them onward through the murky groves

and like a calf that does not heed the yoke

the Gallae follow their ecstatic guide.

At last they reach the house they sought, and from
their hard exertions settle down: no Ceres

with them as slow languor weighs down eyes.
At length their frenzy quietens into calm.
The sun then rose and from that golden face
40. his eyes surveyed the sky and angry sea,
and drove off shadows with his thundering horse.
Attis awoke, and Pasithea took
to beating breast his now departed sleep.

How soon it was, released from dream and madness,
Attis recollected what he'd done,
becoming what he was, and reason why.
His sorrowing mind returned him to the shallows
of that wide sea examined through his tears,
as with a soulful voice he called out there:

50. *'A father to me, and a mother is
the land I fled from to be given Ida.
And like some slave that has escaped his master,
I'm lost in snows and trackless lairs of beasts.
How could I enter in their brutish ways,
imagine henceforth this will be my lot?
How longingly my gaze returns to you
in this brief moment I regain my sense.
For this wild grove I've given up my home,
and lost my country, kin, possessions, friends?*

60. *No forum, stadium, or gymnasium:
the wretched heart complains, again, again.
What shape I've not become, or not performed
as young man, woman, youth, the merest boy,
the flower of athletes, toast of wrestling ring,
my door frequented and its threshold warm,
a house adorned with flowers, one where I
at sunrise sprang up lightly from my bed.
I serve the gods now, slave to Cybele,
and am reduced to Maenad, half a man.*

70. *To me green Ida is perpetual snow
and Phrygian mountains form my summer view,
with deer to talk to as the wild boar roam.*

How much I grieve and shall regret my loss.'

The words that sped out from this mouth were caught by double, outraged ears of Cybele.

She loosed the lions from their leash, and goaded one that stood there on her left. She said:

'Be off, and terrorize him, make him mad.

So will the reckless one return forthwith

80. *who would dispute my sovereignty. Wind back*

that tail, unsheathe your claws, and let your rage

reverberate around, and flare your mane

to red that stridently surmounts your neck.'

In anger so the goddess spoke, and loosed forthwith the beast. It roared and tore away and went on bounding through the thickets till it reached the wet, soft margin of the sands and saw frail Attis near the ocean waves.

It roared and went for him, when Attis fled

90. to wood's deep darkness, a perpetual slave.

Great goddess, Cybele and Dindymus' mistress: keep your madness from my house, but drive the others frenzied, headlong on.

Note

Carmen 63 is a tour de force: unflinching verse in the rapid galliambic metre. The theme is rare in Roman literature, but was popular among the Alexandrian Greeks. Attis castrates himself in devotion to Cybele, but later regrets his sacrifice. When the goddess sends a lion to drive Attis back to the grove, he loses not only freedom but essential humanity, a loss which Catullus may have felt in his affair with Lesbia.

A translation that generally respects the line order but omits many beauties of detail. Glossary:

2. *Phrygian: western part of Asia Minor.*

9. *Cybele: great earth goddess of fertility, whose followers castrated themselves. She was often attended by lions.*

13. *mistress of Dindymus: another name for Cybele, taken from the*

mountain of that name in Phrygia.

23. Maenads: frenzied women followers of Bacchus.

34. Gallae: followers of Cybele, perhaps so called after a river in Phrygia.

36. Ceres: goddess of growth and Eleusinian mysteries.

43. Pasithea: one of the younger Graces: wife of Hypnos, god of sleep.

70. Ida: mountains in southern Phrygia.

Carmen 64

One time, it's said, the pines of Pelion's top-
most peak were seen to cross clear Neptune's waves,
and chosen youths, the oaks of Argive craft,
fared out to Phasis on Aetes' lands
to seek in Colchis for the golden fleece.

Athwart the salt waves in their ship they went
and dug their firwood oars in sea-blue depths.
From cities safely held the goddess kept
their pinewood ribbing fastened close to keel,
10. and urged their vessel onward with the breeze.

The ship that ventured on these foreign realms
and cleaved a choppy passage through its waves,
churned up the harsh sea into surf and caused
the deep-sea Nereids to raise their heads.
They marvelled at this novel apparition,
when mortals only on this day could see
surpassing beauty in the nipples bared
to foam that tumbled in the vessel's wake.
So Peleus, gazing, fell in love with Thetis
20. who was not scornful of a mortal marriage
when Jupiter approved of such a match.

O heroes born into the time of heroes,
hail the noble offspring of most noble
mothers! Here and often I shall sing you,
celebrating that auspicious marriage
made by Peleus of Thessaly —
a chief on whom great Jupiter himself,
the father of the gods, set seal of love.
Did not the lovely daughter of Nereus
30. hold you, her of Tethys and the seas
of Oceanus rounding all the world?

The longed-for day arrives in its due time
and each in Thessaly, from every home,
attends the palace, where the crowds are packed

with smiles and joyful offerings. They leave
Cieros and Pthiotis' Tempe,
the homes of Crannon and Larisa walls,
to verge on Pharsalus and nearby homes.
The land's forsaken and the bull at ease:
40. no vine is tended nor the hillside ploughed.
No more the pruner thins out shade from trees,
and rust accumulates on disused ploughs.

The master's palace shines in gold and silver:
thrones of ivory, and blazing cups, the whole
rejoicing in this royal celebration.
On marriage couch the goddess Tethys, wife
of Oceanus, and granddame to Thetis.
And in the middle, draped on tusk-hewn box,
a cloth deep-dyed in murex crimson, there
50. displayed embroidery of ancient men
who had the manliness of heroes then.

It showed from Dia's shore in silvered surf
a Theseus gone swiftly with his fleet
and Ariadne, filled with disbelief
at what her eyes disclosed to her, was now
awoken from her treacherous sleep. She finds
herself discarded on a bare sand beach,
and lover urgently deploying oars,
with ardent promises but blustering winds.
60. She wades out into seaweed shallows, stares,
this daughter of King Minos, with her eyes
a stone Bacchante's, as approaching waves
whelm on towards her in their threatening force.

Undone the headpiece round her flaxen hair,
unkempt the clothes that gave her comeliness,
nor are the milky breasts bound in by bands.
Undone, the robes drift out, and listlessly
she watches as the waves play round her feet.
She has no thought for her appearance, is

70. but woman sorrowing, who in her soul
still loves and hungers for you, Theseus.

Most miserable, this one whom Venus scourged
with all the thorny sorrows from the time
that Theseus left Piraeus shores to reach
Gortynian palaces of Crete's stern king.
The first he was, the flower of youths and girls
received as tribute by the Minotaur
as penalty that Crecops' kingdom paid
for its past killing of Androgeon.

80. Evading evil in the narrow ways
came Theseus boldly therefore, one who would
more choose that fearful death himself than make
his countrymen be corpses bound for Crete.

Picture that light ship with gentle winds
sent on to Minos and his haughty house,
a princess gazing on the scene, whose eye
was clear as chasteness of her perfumed bed,
and welcome as her mother's close embrace,
or as Eurotas streams that bloom with myrtles,
90. or any flowers that fill the sweet spring air.
From him she could not take her kindled look
until that splendid body filled her thoughts
and laid its siege against her trusting heart.

Desire, you have no pity, stirring up
our expectations with your joy and cares.
And you, who rule the Golgi and in green
Idalium, how much you turned the head
of this poor girl towards that golden form.
What fears were felt within the trembling heart
100. as pallor came and went in that warm face.

So Theseus sought to fight the Minotaur,
to bring him fame: if not, then death. But still
he walked at one imbued with gifts, and to
the gods he offered up his silent prayers.

But just as oak tree tossed about on Taurus
tops by unchecked tempest falls, and, falling,
pulls up the pine tree with its oozing bark
(by roots torn out, indeed, and reaching far
to bring down all that lies across its path)
110. so then did Theseus when he struck the beast
do more than fell the thing with tossing horns.
Victorious, to great renown, the thin
thread laying out the wandering path that led
him undetected from the labyrinth
(whose windings otherwise would hold him still)
the conqueror came.

Since now I've left the song
we entered with, I should go on. The daughter
quit her father, and the sanctuary
of sister and the mother's warm embrace
120. that was her all, and chanced then on a stranger's
love, who, having brought her to the foaming
shores of Dia, kissed soft eyes asleep
and prompt forsook her, such his feckless heart.

Repeatedly, they say, she poured out blazing
indignation, hurt and grief. At times,
exhausted, gloomily, she climbed the cliffs
to gaze out on the vast expanse of sea.
At times she went up to the waves themselves
and lifted dress above her naked calves,
130. and gave herself to saddened remonstrance,
the harsh words spilling out from her hurt mouth:

*'Abandoned, far from native altars, so
you'd leave me, Theseus, on this lonely shore?
You'd disregard the gods we hold, and take
on back with you the bogus oaths you swore?
Can nothing change this act's rank callousness
that you assent to feel some sympathy,
or are you pitiless and hard of heart?*

*When first you won me with that flattering tongue
140. it was not this you bid me long for, but
the joys of marriage bed, and nuptial songs
the wind has scattered from us, unfulfilled.*

*So should a woman never trust the vows
that men may make, or what they say in haste.
Intent on their desires they promise much
but once that hot and furious lust is quenched
the true obedience in their words is fled.*

*I caught you thrown about in death's harsh winds
150. and saved you when I should have served my kin.
I helped you in your greatest need, and now
will be dismembered by the beasts and birds
of prey, and have no covering for my bones.
What lion brought you up beneath its cliff?
or sea spray spat you out upon conception?
What ravenous Syrtis, Scylla or Charybdis
you pay me back with for the life I gave?*

*For if our marriage had not pleased your heart
because of an old father's stern exactions,
160. at least you could have led me safely home.
I would have served you willingly as slave
and with clean water washed your sovereign feet
and draped a purple shawl across the bed.
But here and maddened by this shameful act
my speech is for the empty winds that can
not hear me or return my voice, while he
who made this travels on great realms of sea
and has no thought for one left on this beach.
The savage winds drown out my voice, and would
170. begrudge the justice in the words I speak.*

*How much, great Jupiter, I wish the Grecian
ships had never come to Cretan shores,
that when they bore their cargo to the bull
this traitor had not cast his line ashore,*

*that he, who looked so handsome in his guile
had not found welcome as a guest of ours.*

*Who'll give me shelter now, a woman ruined?
Or even from the Ida hills stretch out a hand
when seas and boiling whirlpools lie between?
180. How can I look for father's help when flight
is sullied with his son's, my brother's, blood?
And as for spouse to pledge and fight for me,
this very moment sees him speed away.
This island round me offers not a roof
or habitation, route from its surrounding
seas. No hope of anything when land
appears so destitute of all but death.
But nonetheless I will not shut my eyes,
nor let my senses fall from me, until
190. this one, betrayed, who now must make her end,
receive from gods some final recompense.*

*I call on Furies who avenge foul acts,
Eumenides with hair of writhing snakes,
that they, with anger on their breath, attend
and study now the case I put. This one,
afflicted, wretched to her very self
of bones, in passion pours out from her heart
all hope and sorrow: May her cause be not
relinquished to the passing winds, but pressed
200. on Theseus who made it so. With like
pollute him, goddess, and pursue his kind.'*

All this she uttered from her maddened heart,
imploping retribution for her pain.

The king of heaven heard her: at his will
the earth was shaken, and the ceaseless waters,
and sky too shimmered with its train of stars.

So was the mind of Theseus displaced,
and into darkness cast what he had heard.

He lost his usual guile, and when he came
210 at last to Athens' harbour did not think

to change the sad sails saying he was lost.

His father Aegeus he forgot, the words
the old man gave him on Athena's walls,
when father held the son, and said: *'Remember,
one more dear to me than what remaining years
can bring, whom I must send to unknown ends,
come back to bless the evening of our life.
To fate we leave you and your bravery,
but still these tired, old, failing eyes of ours
220. have not enough of your strong, manly grace.*

*We do not send you forth with happiness
or under flags of dipping fortune, but
against the protests of a grieving heart
that scatters earth and ashes on grey hairs.
We tell you hoist the sails if ships return
in mourning with a Spanish red, a gloomy
message from the mast, but if
the great inhabitant of sacred Iton
has saved Erectheus' race and home,
230. and made your right hand shed the foul bull's blood,
then make the issue clear. So keep our words
well guarded that they never slip from mind.
The once your eyes perceive our native hills,
strip out the mournful cloth of sails and hoist
with twisted ropes the white and welcome ones,
immediately, moreover, that we see
you safe returned to us, as in the past.'*

These words, which Theseus had absorbed,
were like the clouds the wind blows off the mountain
240. tops, and Aegeus from his citadel
who looked out anxiously, from hour to hour,
beheld at last the dreaded sails, despaired
and straightway hurled himself from that high cliff:
a death brought on in punishment that told
of Theseus meeting with a brutal fate.

In this way came the perjured safe to home
and mourn a father he had lost, and have
the sorrows of the Minos girl be his,
who even then was following that sped ship
250. on many voyages throughout her mind.

But Bacchus, flower-hung, was hurrying near
with Satyr choruses, and old Silenus:
they sought you, Ariadne, fired with love . . .

The frenzied Maenads raving here and far
were tossing heads and shouting 'Bacchus',
shaking thyrsi with a covered stick,
or whirling bull's dismembered parts. Some wrapped
the serpents' winding coils around them. Some
were beating hollow boxes, honouring
260. the secret rites disclosed to celebrants.
Some beat their drums with palms raised high. Some
from their rounded cymbals struck a sonorous note.
Some blew an endless booming hum from horns
and some from pipes produced a hideous shriek.

So showed the cloth, its splendid figures wrought
on folds that wholly covered up the couch.
The Thessalonians took their fill of this
and, pleased, began to leave the sanctuary.
Across the calm, cool sea the West Wind spread
270. the breath of morning, and the waves were stirred.
Aurora meanwhile rising from the rays
of sun sees waves that first were lengthening out,
pursued by breezes into lazy ripples,
but, as the wind picked up, so they increased,
reflecting purple from the far-off light.
The people left the forecourt, royally roofed,
and took their way reluctantly. When gone,
the centaur Chiron came, from Peleus's top,
and carried woodland gifts: whatever blooms
in meadowlands, on Thessalonian mountain

280. flanks, or what the fertile breezes of
the warm west winds persuade to bloom in rich
profusion on the varied streamside banks.
With his own hands he brought the plaited wreathes
that wholesome scents could breathe through homes about,
and bring forth Penius, that left the Tempē
valley hemmed about by hanging woods
and thick with choral dancers, and indeed
not empty, but with roots and upright trunks
of beech trees and tall laurel, upright sprung
290. with swaying maple, and the supple twin
of burning Phaethon, and with cypresses.

With care he laid these trees against the house
so all the forecourt there was rich in green.
And after him there came the wise Prometheus
who still bore signs of ancient punishment,
of limbs once fastened to the rocks that he
undid while hanging on that mountain peak.
The father of the gods with family
arrived and left but Phoebus in the sky,
300. and those inhabitants of Idrus hills.

Peleus and sister, both of them,
disdained to celebrate the Thetis feast,
but later on white thrones had laid themselves
before the tables richly heaped with food.
The Fates, with trembling limbs, meanwhile began
to pour out truths amid their tuneful song,
their white robes covering their agitation.
They wrapped their ankles with a purple trim,
and put a rose band round their snowy heads
310. as hands returned to their habitual tasks.
Their left hand held the distaff of soft wool
with right hand deftly teasing out the threads.
Their thumb and finger gave them shape, and drew
off thread with spindle to the hands below.
A tooth cut off untidy threads and made
the woolly morsel smooth against dry lips

which earlier had projected from the spool.
And at their feet a wicker basket lay
heaped high with woolly scraps of unused fleece,
320. the which they worked on as their voice proclaimed
a stream of prophecies in heaven's own word
no age of evil afterwards disproves.

*'Defence of Thessaly, dear son of Jove,
who adds a glory to existent powers,
325. accept the truth the Sisters show you now
on this most happy day, though hurrying on,
your spindles drawing in the threads of fate.*

*The evening star will bring the wished-for things
to wife and husband of one constant mind:
330. a wife who gives her heart in mutual love
will sleep in union with you, and will place
a trusting arm beneath your robust neck.
Haste on then spindle with your cross threads drawn.
No home has ever sheltered such a love,
or joined the lovers with so strong a bond:
accord for Thetis and for Peleus.
Haste on then spindle with your cross threads drawn.*

*A fearless Achilles will be born to you,
well known to foe by bravery and not
340. his back. The victor of life's wandering race,
he will outdo the speed of running deer.
Haste on then spindle with your cross threads drawn.
For none will equal him in that long war
that makes the Phrygian fields thick-soaked with blood,
the walls of Troy besieged in consequence
of what deceitful Pelops' third heir brought.
Haste on then spindle with your cross threads drawn.*

*Dead sons their mothers will compare to him,
renowned in deed and excellence, for all
350. they loose their grey hair at their loss, and have
but feeble hands to beat on withered breasts.*

*Haste on then spindle with your crossed threads drawn.
As harvesters who toil all day in fields
of bristling wheat beneath the blazing sun,
so will his weapons cut down Trojan men.*

*Haste on then spindle with your crossed threads drawn.
Scamander's waves will witness powers of his,
which, spread out from the whirling Hellespont,
will choke its passage with the heaped-up dead
360. and warm its frigid current with the blood.*

*Haste on then spindle with your crossed threads drawn.
The booty given him at death will see
a grave that's topped by funeral mound receive
the virgin's snow-white limbs in sacrifice.*

*Haste on then spindle with your crossed threads drawn.
For soon as fortune gave the Trojan town
to wearied Greeks and loosened Neptune's ties,
Polyxena's rich blood must soak the lofty
tomb like to a captive downed with two-edged sword
370. whose body falls before its own bent knee.*

*Haste on then spindle with your crossed threads drawn.
Come and join together as is wished, and let
the husband have his goddess in a bond
of joy, and bride engage with eager spouse.*

*Haste on then spindle with your crossed threads drawn.
The nurse that pays another visit at the dawn
spins not the stuff of yesterday, nor will
the mother, hearing how her daughter sleeps
apart, give up her hope of children still.*

*380. Haste on then spindle with your crossed threads drawn.
The Fates, foretelling long ago their joy
for Peleus, sang out their inner joy.
From heaven formerly the gods came down
to visit rustic homes of heroes, there
to show themselves in person and receive
their rights and duty. And indeed great Jove,
returning to his golden temple when*

*the yearly rites came round on festal days
received one hundred slaughtered bulls.*

And Bacchus

*390. too, with followers, their hair undone,
and loosed from high Parnassus, in a rout
came down to Delphi where the maddened town
in emulation raised its shrines of smoke.
Often in the war was Mars or mistress
of Tritonis, Artemis as well,
in person urging on the fighting men.'*

Thereafter, earth was drenched with wickedness
and justice put from our enquiring minds:
the brother stained his hand with brother's blood,
400. and parents' passing was not mourned by sons.
The father waited on the death of son
to take, and lawfully, the lovely bride,
and mother lay beside unknowing son.
All dared to desecrate the household gods,
with passion mixing up both good and ill,
which turns us from the steady mind of gods.
No more was given them this host to gaze
408. on, nor the bountiful, clear light of day.

Note

Once dismissed as a laboured effort in the style of Callimachus, this miniature epic of Peleus and Thetis is today regarded more sympathetically. The piece is intelligible enough once the basic structure is grasped. A first section (1-42) describes the meeting of the Argonaut Peleus with the sea nymph Thetis. Then (43-51) comes their marriage, celebrated in the halls of Peleus. A third section (52-253) describes the tale of Ariadne and Theseus, depicted by the coverlet on the wedding couch. A fourth section (254-266) continues with the tale told by coverlet but switches abruptly to Bacchus, who rescued the abandoned Ariadne. In a fifth section (267-277) the marriage guests leave the halls of Peleus, and the gods arrive. With section six (277-396) appear the prophetic Fates, who speak of Achilles, son of Peleus and Thetis. In a final

section (397-408) Catullus moralizes on man's decline from the golden age.

Despite this complexity, with five narrative sections followed by a wedding song and concluding in a moralizing epilogue, there is much balancing of themes. The fate of Theseus parallels that of Ariadne. Praise for heroic times is contrasted by today's degeneracy, but undercut by the shabby behaviour of Theseus. Arrival and departure constantly feature: of the Argonauts, Theseus and Ariadne, Bacchus and his Maenads, of wedding guests and the gods. Certainly the poem lacks a compelling narrative, and is often tangled by unnecessary detail, but the work led the way to the contrast of present with mythic past that Propertius and Ovid were to make their own.

It should be noted that the original dactylic hexameter has more extended and often beautiful passages than this translation has achieved in blank verse. There are also many questions of interpretation not treated here, and odd lines where I have let the run of the English depart from what the original strictly says. The overall meaning is retained, however, and the version is almost line for line. A brief glossary:

- 1. Pelion: mountain in Thessaly, northern Greece.*
- 3. Argive: Greek: section refers to the journey of the Argonauts.*
- 4. Aeetes was a king of Colchis, and Phasis its major river.*
- 8. goddess: Athena.*
- 14. Nereids: sea nymphs.*
- 19. Peleus was one of the Argonauts. Thetis was the granddaughter of Oceanus and Thetys, rulers of the sea.*
- 36-9. Cieros, Pthiotis, Crannon, Larisa and Pharsalus are towns in Thessaly. Tempe is a famous valley here.*
- 43. master's palace: Peleus'.*
- 52. Dia: small island off Crete, or possibly Naxos.*
- 61. Minos: king of Knossian Crete.*
- 75. Gortyn was a city in Crete.*
- 78. Crecops: ancient king of Athens.*
- 79. Androgeon: son of Minos, murdered by Aegeus envious at his success in the Panathenaic games.*
- 89. Eurotas: river in the Peloponnese of southern Greece.*
- 96. Golgos, Idalium: locations in Cyprus.*
- 105. Taurus: mountains in Asia Minor.*
- 156. Syrtis are the dangerous shallows in the Gulf of Sidra in north Africa. Scylla and Charybdis are rocks and whirlpool in the Straits of Messina*

between Sicily and Italy.

178. Idrus hills: mountains in central Crete.

193. Eumenides: Furies who punished wrong doing.

212. Aegeus: king of Athens and father of Theseus.

228. Iton: Athena, who had a shrine here.

229. Erectheus: early king of Athens.

251. Bacchus: Dionysus, god of wine.

252. Silenus: an old satyr.

253-4. One or more lines may be missing here.

254. Maenads: women inspired by ecstatic frenzy for Dionysus.

277. Chiron: wise centaur who became the mentor of young Achilles.

285. Penius: Peneios river in Thessaly.

290-1: supple twin: poplar tree: sisters of Phaeton were changed into poplar trees after their brother fell from his burning chariot.

294. Prometheus: god who was punished for giving fire to mankind.

299. Phoebus: Phoebus Apollo, the sun god.

301-2. An oddity: reason for their disdain is unclear.

344. Phrygia: area around Troy.

346 Pelops: founder of the Mycenaean kingdom but cursed by foul deeds: his descendant Agamemnon led the Greeks in the Trojan War.

364. virgin: reference to Polyxena, daughter of King Priam of Troy: sacrificed on the tomb of Achilles.

391. Parnassus: a sacred mountain in Greece, a few miles north of the oracle at Delphi, and associated with Apollo and the Muses.

395 Tritonis: river in Boeotia: Athena. Artemis: goddess of the hunt, wild animals and virginity.

MALE FRIENDSHIPS

Carmen 50

Yesterday I spent the idle hours
with you, Licinius. On writing wax
each jesting with the other, at his ease,
we scribbled verses as the fancy took us
now in this odd metre, now in that.
Each answered each, and laughed and drank
his wine, but I have come away with mind
so fired with what was said, Licinius,
that food has lost its savour and the night
which came thereafter was not blessed with sleep.
Restlessly I tossed about my couch,
and ached throughout the interval to dawn
when I might come again and talk with you.
Eventually, my body half worn out
by turning, more a corpse wrapped up in sheets,
I wrote this poem for you — which, sweet friend,
gives shape to sufferings. But still in this,
I beg you be not over-proud, nor out
of hand reject, my brother, what I ask.
Remember Nemesis exacts her toll:
a powerful goddess who will not forgive.

Note

Licinius refers to the poet and orator Gaius Licinius Calvus. Original in the hendesyllabic metre, here rendered as blank verse.

Carmen 48

If, continually, I got
to kiss your sweet-as-honey eyes
I'd kiss you there three hundred thousand
times and not be sated: no,
not if that crop of kissing grew
as thick as wheat-ears in a field.

Note

Probably addressed to Juventius, and written in the hendesyllabic metre.

Carmen 99

I stole a kiss from you in play, my honey-sweet
 Juventius. But, heavenly as
it was, it brought its punishment: for in the painful
 progress of an hour I found
my body stretched out on the top part of a cross.
 With tears I tried to justify
myself, which did not stem your rage. You washed your mouth
 out, copiously, your fingers wiping
clean whatever taste my mouth had made, as though
 my spittle were the she-wolf's piss.
And then you bound me to unhappy love that still
 excoriates me worse, so that
a kiss that was of god's ambrosial breath is now
 a purge more harsh than hellebore.
Such testing love you have imposed, I shall not steal
 one kiss to compromise you more.

Note

Catullus's farewell to Juventius.

CONCLUDING POEMS

Carmen 4

This little boat will tell you, guests,
she was the fastest of her craft,
with none beside her: things afloat
saw no one challenge her for speed
in swelling sail or strength of oars.
None dispute that, not the harsh
Atlantic, isles of Cyclades,
or noble Rhodes or wild Propontis,
or the Euxine's savage sea
where this before was sylvan shape —
for on the heights of Cytorus
she often whispered through her leaves.
She says these things are known to you,
Amastris and to you, Cytorus.
From first she stood upon your height
and dipped her oars into your waters,
carrying he who is her owner
safely over treacherous waves,
with wind to starboard, wind to larboard.
Jupiter to fill her sails
this way, that way, and together.
No prayers to sea gods did she give
on travelling from distant waters
out into our silvered lake.
But that is past, and now at peace
she gives her seasoned self to you,
the brothers who are Heavenly Twins.

Note

The Cyclades are islands in the eastern Mediterranean. The Euxine is the Black Sea, and Propontis the territory immediately south. Amastris and Cytorus were ports in Paphlagonia on the southern coast of the same sea.

The Heavenly Twins are Castor and Pollux, brothers to Helen of Troy. The original metre is the iambic trimeter.

34. Song: to Diana

Chaste as girls and boys we are,
let us truly, boy and girl,
celebrate the chaste Diana.
You the daughter of Latona,
progeny of powerful Jove,
whom your mother near the Delian
olive tree was made to be
the mistress of the filial mountains,
and of woods fresh clothed in green,
of sylvan spots of deep seclusion
where the streams were wont to sing.
Juno of Lucina called
by women straining in their labour,
Trivia, and Luna too
of the counterfeited light.
May you, goddess of the monthly
movement marking out the year
give to rural homes of farmers
abundant produce of the fields.
Take whatever name may please you,
continue your accustomed style:
preserve the race of Romulus.

Note

Latona was a daughter of the Titan Coeus, and gave birth to Diana and Apollo on Mount Cynthus. Delos is an island in the Aegean. Juno of Lucina is an aspect of Diana. Trivia is a Thracian goddess of witches. Romulus was one of the legendary founders of Rome. The stanza in the original is composed of three glyconic verses followed by one pherecratean, and the whole is two lines longer than this translation.

Carmen 96

If anything so wrought of pain can reach
to please our stillness, Calvus, in the grave,
with yearnings to renew the loves now gone,
and tears at first of friendships we dismissed,
Quintilia is not sad at early death
but blessed remembering what love she had.

Note

Quintilia was the mistress, and possibly wife, of the poet and orator Gaius Licinius Calvus.

RESOURCES

I have found these sources the most useful:

1. *Gaius Valerius Catullus*.

<http://www.vroma.org/~hwalker/VRomaCatullus/Catullus.html>. Original text and translations by H.J. Walker.

2. *Catullus: the Poems*.

<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Catullus.htm>.

Translations of all poems by A.S. Kline.

3. *Gaius Valerius Catullus*. <http://www.negenborn.net/catullus/>. Some 1200 translations in 33 languages.

4. *Poems of Gaius Valerius Catullus*. <http://www.poemhunter.com/gaius-valerius-catullus/>. Translations of 28 poems on this PoemHunter site.

5. *Gaius Valerius Catullus*. <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/606>. Biographical entry in [poets.org](http://www.poets.org) and selected translations.

6. *The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition*. Peter Green. (2005, Univ. Cal. Press) <http://www.ucpress.edu/books/chapters/10257.intro.pdf>. A pdf version of the introduction free on line.

7. *Poetry of Catullus*. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry_of_Catullus. Wikipedia entry.

8. *Theater of Pompey*. <http://www.theaterofpompey.com/>. A large site on the Roman world, with translations and notes on Catullus.

9. *The Poems of Catullus: A Teaching Text*. Phyllis Young Forsyth. (University Press of America, 1986)