

Catullus & His Poetry

Gaius Valerius Catullus

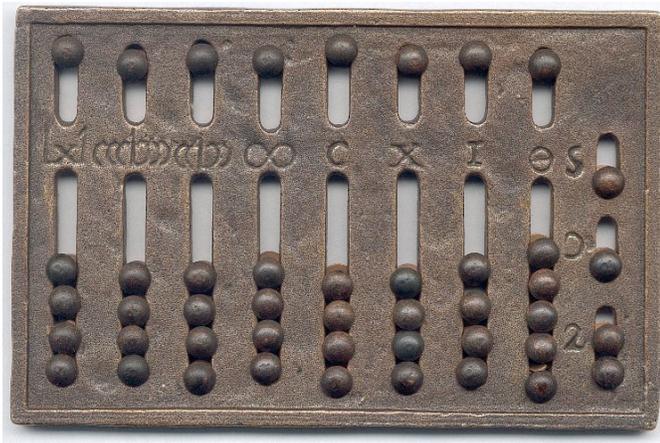
- Lived c. 84-54 BC
- Born in Verona, spent most of his adult life in Rome
- Roman poet → called a *poeta novus* for his “modern” style of writing
- Acquaintances with Julius Caesar and Cicero
- Had an affair with a married woman whom he called “Lesbia” in his poetry

Catullus’ Poetry

- One of the most widely read poets of his time
- Wrote 1 book of poetry with 116 poems
- His poetry was written on papyrus
- The poetry was lost for several hundreds of years, until the 1300s when they were fortuitously discovered!
- Poems describe his love affair, friendship, family, emotions, enemies, etc.
- His poetry was revolutionary because he described his feelings and relationships for the reader in an intimate and honest way
- His poetry is very artistic, though it often seems at first to be simple and spontaneous



A painting of Lesbia who mourns her pet sparrow's death



A Roman abacus (counting board)

Catullus’ Poem 5

- Poem 5 is one of Catullus’ most famous works
- It is the first poem where Catullus talks directly to his girlfriend Lesbia
- In the poem, Catullus is encouraging Lesbia to love him
- See if you notice the appearance of numbers and counting in the poem as you read it

Catullus 5

Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus.
Rumoresque senum severiorum
omnes unius assis aestimemus!

Soles occidere et redire possunt.
Nobis, cum semel occidit **brevis lux**,
nox perpetua una est dormienda.

Da mihi basia mille, deinde centum,
dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,
deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum.

Dein, cum **milia multa** fecerimus,
conturbabimus **illa basia**, ne sciamus,
aut ne aliquis malus invidere possit,
cum sciat tantum esse basiorum.

line 1: atque: *and*
line 2: severiorum: *rather grumpy, too grumpy*
(modifies *senum*)
line 3: unius assis: *one as, one penny* (genitive of price → describes how much it's worth)
aestimo, -are: *reckon, value*
line 4: occido, -ere: *set, sink*
redire, redire: *return*
line 5: cum: *when, since*
semel: *once*
brevis, -is, -e: *short, brief*
lux, luctis, f: *light*
line 6: est dormienda: *must be slept*
line 7: deinde (or dein): *then*
line 8: alter, altera, alterum: *another*
line 9: usque: *all the way to, still*
line 11: conturbo, -are: *mix up, jumble*
line 12: aliquis: *someone, anyone*
invideo, -ere: *envy*
line 13: tantum: *so many*

Thought Questions

Answer the following questions before we translate the poem as best you can.

1. Look through the poem and find all of the Latin words that have to do with **light** and **dark**. Write them (and translate each) below. Where are these words positioned in the poem? What do lightness and darkness symbolize?
2. Now look through the poem and find all of the Latin words that have to do with **numbers** and **counting**. Write them (and translate each) below, and group them into categories based on whether they are big or small.
3. Why do you think the old men in the poem are rather grumpy?
4. Many people who read this poem think that the first line of the poem sets up an equation. Catullus seems to be saying that to live is to love, and to love is to live. According to this equation, then, what significance does the kissing play in the poem?
5. Why do you think Catullus doesn't want to know how many kisses he and Lesbia share?
6. To whom do you think the "aliquis malus" refers?
7. Why do you think the "aliquis malus" would be jealous of Caullus and Lesbia?