

Walter Ralph JOHNSON
Unexpurgating Queer Catullus

Heterosexist bias has distorted our view of Catullus and turned him into a Romantic-Victorian heterosexual.

A half century ago, the construction of a Catullus without any same-sexual repertoire had reached its perfection, and the process by which this purely heterosexual Catullus came into existence was virtually invisible. In the Loeb edition I bought in 1953, the poems in question were left untranslated. In this volume and in the erotic code it fabricated, Juventius might seem nothing more than the poet's younger school chum. In the 50's translators were a little less timid in taking notice of the same-sexual themes and images that pervade the collection, but commentators in their Latin editions (e.g. Fordyce) were not much bolder; most teachers simply skipped 'those' poems with no explanation.

The Romantic-Victorian-hetero reading of Catullus (with its erasures of queer Catullus) is part of a larger discourse that, in discouraging non-reproductive sex, validates 'good' eroticism and punishes 'bad' eroticisms--or destroys them by ignoring them.

In 19th and early to middle 20th century classical pedagogy, readings of Catullus (some of which linger with us) affirmed a powerful erotic genius who, though properly punished for his other-sexual excess, provided the canon with vivid celebrations of Love. But his various same-sexual utterances were all but obliterated in the name of a universal and compulsory heterosexuality.