

The Way Their Catullus Walked: Changing Strategies of Translation by Elizabeth Vandiver

“What would they say/ Did their Catullus walk that way?” Yeats’ indictment of “bald heads forgetful of their sins” is of course aimed not at translators, but at commentators and Classics scholars in general; however, it is a commonplace to say that each act of translation is in itself a commentary. Any translation of Catullus’ poetry provides a great deal of insight into the assumptions about Catullus in particular and lyric poetry in general that the translator brought to the work. And of course these assumptions have changed radically over time; as Gaisser has pointed out, “Yeats’ desperate, passionate Catullus is a child of early twentieth-century romanticism, conceived in reaction to the excesses of nineteenth-century philology. ... The Catullus of our time is much closer to Yeats’ bloodless scholars than to his amorous poet; for we tend to imagine not a desperate man in the thrall of passionate emotion, but a learned Alexandrian” (p. 1). While scholars’ view of Catullus has been shifting from the romantic image of a young man pouring out his heart in direct, unmediated expressions of emotion to that of an erudite, learned, allusive writer using the appearance of emotion as a vehicle for his Alexandrianism, translations of Catullus’ poetry into English have also mirrored changing ideas about poetry. Translators have tended to give us a simpler, blunter Catullus even as scholars have argued for an ever more sophisticated one; the flowery, over-wrought, artificially poetic Catullus found in many eighteenth and nineteenth-century translations has (with a few notable exceptions) given way to a plain-spoken poet whose direct approach is anything but Alexandrian.

This paper will examine some of the ways in which strategies for translating Catullus into English have changed over time. My discussion will concentrate on two very different Catullan poems, c. 11 and c. 84, and will compare the choices made by several translators in their rendering of these poems. Both present a number of very difficult challenges to the translator. For example, since c. 11 is one of only two Catullan poems written in Sapphic meter, the first decision a translator must make is whether that metrical fact is significant, and if so how the meter should be indicated in English. Syntax is no less a challenge than meter in c. 11; the translator must decide whether to try to preserve the urgency and rapidity of the Latin text, whose 24 lines comprise one long sentence (or perhaps two if one follows Thomson in punctuating with a period after line 16). Word placement and alliteration are also particularly important, even by Catullan standards, in this poem (Vandiver 1992). Furthermore, a translation must deal with the sudden change of tone when the erudite “geographical catalog” gives way to the brutal **non bona dicta** of stanza 5. Finally, there are questions of word choice in the rendering of such terms as **moechus** and **culpa**.

The second poem under consideration, c. 84, presents very different problems for the translator. Where the emotional content of the last two stanzas of c. 11 appears to have an immediate appeal that (seemingly) transcends cultural differences, the appeal of c. 84 lies almost entirely in its verbal dexterity. This poem’s art consists in the interplay of sound and sense, in the placement not only of the aspirates but also of the sibilants

(Vandiver 1990). In translation, when these elements are lost, the poem falls very flat. And this is not the only difficulty translators face in c. 84. Dealing as it does with the pronunciation and mispronunciation of the aspirate in Latin, it almost demands to be rendered into English as mockery of a Cockney. However, such a rendering imports into the poem a whole system of specifically British (and outdated) class distinctions that is not necessarily a useful reflection of the opposition between **urbanus** and **rusticus** that underlies the original. Making Arrius into 'Arry does little to persuade modern readers that c. 84 is indeed (as Quintilian called it) a "noble" epigram.

My discussion of both these poems will begin with some of the earliest translations available and will contrast them with 19th century renderings and with the more recent work of Goold, Lee, Rabinowitz, and Whigham, among others. I will point out particular strategies in each translation that strike me as either successful or problematic, and will discuss the ways in which those choices reflect the implicit images of Catullus on which each translator drew.

Bibliography

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