

# Catullus, Gaius Valerius

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A lyric poet from Cisalpine Gaul, Gaius Valerius Catullus (84–54? BCE) was a member of a group of poets at Rome whom Cicero (*see* CICERO, MARCUS TULLIUS) disdainfully labeled the “Neoterics” for their literary experiments in a Hellenizing style (*Att.* 7.2; Lyne 1978). Remembered in antiquity chiefly for his love affair with “Lesbia,” whom APULEIUS identified as CLODIA, Catullus sought poetic inspiration from the Alexandrian aesthetics of CALLIMACHUS and APOLLONIUS RHODIUS. The *liber Catulli* combines polymetrics (1–60), short poems in a variety of meters, with longer poems in “higher” genres (61–8), and concludes with a section of epigrams (69–116; *see* EPIGRAM). Central to this corpus are values associated with *otium* and performed in the *convivium*. Code words such as *urbanus*, *bellus*, *dicax*, and *venustus* are part of the poet’s critical arsenal of praise and blame for contemporaries who abide by or transgress the values of this private exclusive world (Krostenko 2001).

The figure of “Lesbia” provides a unifying theme in an otherwise notoriously disjointed poetic collection (Skinner 2007). The polymetrics are notable for their social content and the subjective emotional voice that addresses friends, enemies, and courtesans in a variety of settings from the Roman Forum to the *convivium*. “Lesbia” herself embodies the elegance, refinement, and wit that are indicative of Catullus’ own poetry. Catullus’ description of her qualities and the sexual inversion of their relationship would have a lasting effect on the image of the elegiac *puella* in Augustan literature. Catullus plays the role of the female partner in their affair, comparing himself to mythical heroines and even adopting the persona of SAPPHO (51), whereas “Lesbia” assumes the role of the dominating and disloyal male (Skinner 1993).

Mythic themes dominate the section of longer poems, where Catullus engages directly

with the mythic past and “higher” genres, such as hymn, epic, and narrative elegy. Two marriage hymns provide an optimistic beginning to this section, which quickly adopts a more pessimistic tone of separation, loss, and death. Like other Neoterics, Catullus composed a poem on the theme of the cult of Magna Mater, but from the perspective of a self-castrated eunuch Attis, whose soliloquy shares the personal style found in the polymetrics. His epyllion on the marriage of Peleus and Thetis engages with the Alexandrian practice of allusion to question the reliability of narrative traditions. The pessimistic poem 68 compares Catullus’ own affair with “Lesbia” to the doomed marriage of Laodamia and Protesilaus, with Catullus again comparing himself with the abandoned heroine.

The epigrams shift back to topics from the polymetrics and contain a second cycle of “Lesbia” poems (70–87), along with invective attacks on amatory rivals and political figures and a lament for his dead brother. Catullus stands at the end of a long tradition of Latin epigram before the meter was appropriated for elegiac poetry (Ross 2007). The treatment of love, though, differs from the polymetrics, and Catullus takes a more reflective position on his emotions and struggles to define his relationship with “Lesbia” in terms drawn from traditional Roman values such as *amicitia*, *officium*, and *fides*.

## REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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