

FORUM REVIEW

The Poems of Catullus: A Bilingual Edition. Translated with commentary by PETER GREEN. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2005. Pp. xx + 339. Cloth, \$24.95. ISBN 0-520-24264-5.

Peter Green's rendition of Catullus is an important addition to the body of existing translations, though it will appeal to a narrower audience than some. Green's translations are elegant and stylish throughout, if not totally literal; his commentary, which touches on an impressive (if not, understandably, complete) range of modern scholarship, is compact and allusive, designed to pique the interest of the advanced student or the non-specialist scholar. Both commentary and translation will perhaps be less appealing to undergraduates or to the casual reader looking merely for a speedy acquaintance with Catullan themes and content.

The volume, nicely bound and bearing a lively dust jacket scattered with translated lines from the poems, opens with a 41-page introduction to Catullus. This touches on the general biography of Catullus, insofar as we can know it: the "Lesbia/Clodia" question, literary and textual issues, reception, translation and meter. Everything is written succinctly and clearly; this is an introduction worth scanning by anyone about to teach the first day of Catullus class. Green's opinions and reconstructions are firm, consistent and carefully thought out. They do not, however, necessarily agree with the views of all modern Catullan scholarship, or even with the *communis opinio*; one will want to take some of his claims with a grain of salt, or at least with a healthy admixture of other modern scholarship. A prominent example would be his suggestion that Catullus died of tuberculosis, based on references to a cough (poem 44), his "febrile intensity," and "his intense and debilitating erotic preoccupations" (p. 3). Even a quick glance through the introduction (and the notes on individual poems, on which more later) will make it clear that Green inclines toward biographical readings, especially of the Lesbia poems. But the concise summaries of the social history of Catullus' time are invaluable, the section on Lesbia and Roman marital norms is masterfully done, and the remaining portions will be of tremendous use to the advanced student seeking a refresher on, e.g., Alexandrian poetics in the Roman era.

The translations themselves are a delight. Green strives for an approximation (if not an exact reproduction) of the various Catullan meters, with terrific success. Taken as a collection, the poems are lively and varied; taken individually, the majority nail both tone and content of the Latin originals. Green is perhaps stronger on the livelier, more vigorous poems than on sentimental or emotional passages. His version of Ipsithilla is full of gleeful enthusiasm (32.9–12):

uerum si quid ages, statim iubeto:
nam pransus iaceo et satur supinus
pertundo tunicamque palliumque.

Fact is, if you're on, ask me *at once*, I've
lunched, I'm full, flat on my back and bursting
up, up, up through undershirt and bedclothes!

Like this one, erotic and obscene poems are handled briskly and for the most part without coyness, though in these pieces one finds more British slang than elsewhere: e.g., “little scrubber” for *scortillum* at 10.3 (also for *puella* at 41.1; “filthy scrubber” for *o lutum, lupanar* at 42.13); “whanger” for *pene* at 15.9; and “rogering” for *pedicare* at 21.4. “Gallants” for *moechis* at 11.17 seems an odd choice.

The notes assume a sophisticated reader (though again, probably not a Catullus scholar). They are succinct to the point of seeming almost breathless; this characteristic, and their pattern of mentioning secondary references almost *en passant*, might be off-putting to someone unfamiliar with the literature. For a reader with at least a nodding acquaintance with Catullan scholarship of the past two decades, the notes are a useful compendium of important recent work on the author.

I disagree with some of Green's interpretations in the notes, though other readers may not find them exceptional. To list a few: Green seems opposed to metaliterary readings (see the notes on, e.g., poems 1 and 27); as the notes on poem 7 and others indicate, he believes that the Lesbia poems can be lined up chronologically to outline the course of the affair. Gender theory receives widespread application, but the note to poem 5 dismisses Ellen Greene¹ as “suffer[ing] from feminist overkill” (214). The notes' many merits easily outweigh these few issues, however, displaying an easy command of scholarly thought on Roman sexual mores and gender identity, not to mention (unsurprisingly) extensive social and political contextualization for a large number of the poems. If some notes appear to go too far in their speculating (e.g., poem 36 [*Annales Volusi*] must have been composed after the Caelius trial, since

¹ *The Erotics of Domination* (Baltimore, 1998).

Lesbia's stock has fallen so low that she is making vows to get Catullus back), one can still appreciate their smooth juxtaposition of literature with politics. The best notes (e.g., those on 68A and B) are sensitive and balanced almost to a fault on literary issues, while still incorporating paleography, mythology and politics.

All in all, this is without question a book worth owning. While the perfect audience may be relatively small, others will still get considerable pleasure out of Green's volume, whether they pick it up out of an interest in literary translations of the Classics or to acquaint themselves with modern criticism of the poems.

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