



Teaching Sexually-Explicit Catullusⁱ

by Ronnie Ancona

If you come from my generation, you will remember the days when it was annoyingly difficult to figure out much of anything having to do with sex in Latin poetry. When looking up Latin words, we were met with definitions like “obscene activity,” without any specificity as to what the obscene activity was. Definitions, such as they were, often remained in Latin. Loeb Classical Texts were not very helpful either, for they often expurgated, deleting material and / or switching away from the target language of English for translation. Reading Catullus before Adams’ *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (1982) and Wiseman’s “A World Not Ours” in *Catullus and His World* (1985), with its useful and down-to-earth explanations of sexual terms, was a very different experience from the one that our current students face. Accessibility to accurate information about Latin sexual terms and Roman sexuality, more generally, certainly makes reading an author like Catullus much easier today – a welcome change. However, this does not mean that everyone is suddenly reading sexually-explicit Catullus. What teachers want to and feel they can read with students at any level cannot be taken for granted, nor can how such reading is perceived.

Classicists will be aware of the controversy in the United Kingdom in the Spring of 2013 about the AS-level Latin exam set by the OCR Cambridge Exam Board, which included Ovid *Amores* 3.14, lines 1-30, a passage

containing sexual content. Students were asked questions, including the following that required reference to content and style and presentation of supporting examples: “In lines 21-26 ... how does Ovid’s language make clear his enthusiasm for love-making?”ⁱⁱ Responding to newspaper media charges that such a passage was not appropriate, Mary Beard, Professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge, said the following: “The *Amores* is a hugely popular text and, inevitably, like many aspects of ancient culture, it prompts all kinds of discussion about gender, misogyny, eroticism and how these were differently negotiated by the Greeks and Romans. Please, let’s not go back to the days when kids were not supposed to read some poems of say, Catullus, because some old codger had thought they might get corrupted. That was what my generation was brought up with. Of course, the censorship never worked. When we spotted a poem had been left out, we’d always go and track it down to see just how wicked it was.” A spokesperson for the OCR said: “To censor such material would only leave young adults with a false perception of their area of study. If such censorship were to be applied to English literature, it would preclude coverage of the works of D.H. Lawrence, Chaucer, and even Shakespeare.” I must say that I share the sentiments of the OCR and of Professor Beard. Avoiding such material seems to me to deprive students of exposure to a

fundamental facet of Ovid’s language and style.ⁱⁱⁱ

I have had reason recently to think about issues of explicitness as author of a Catullus textbook. In 2004 I published a textbook that was written for the largely United States-based high school Advanced Placement (AP) Catullus syllabus. This syllabus is designed by the College Board for college students as well, since the AP program is intended to provide secondary school students with college level work and college credit and / or college placement. There were bits of explicit language included in the required selections (for example, the word *irrumator* appeared in Poem 10), and I was straightforward in my explanation with “a man who forces someone to give him oral sex; metaphorically, one who treats another with contempt”. Some AP authors sanitized or obfuscated the meaning of such words, as for example in Bender / Forsyth (25) an *irrumator* is: “a deviate, pervert”. When the Catullus portion of the AP was dropped, despite efforts on the part of many classicists, including myself, to keep this very popular author as part of the curriculum, I was asked by my publisher to “repurpose” my Catullus textbook. While my initial response to this request was delight that I could now include whatever poems I liked, the situation became complicated, at least in my mind, because the book had already developed a loyal following among many teachers who planned to keep using it despite the end

of the Catullus AP.

In order to help with my plans for repurposing, I did some informal surveying through Latinteach, an international, but in practice almost completely American, electronic discussion group, asking teachers whether they had ever taught Poems 6, 16, 32, and 57, the poems I wanted to add in addition to four Lesbia poems, why or why not, and so forth. About 35 college and pre-collegiate teachers responded.^{iv} Almost all said they set the curriculum themselves, although many not without thought of possible “outside” consequences of their choices. Not surprisingly, most of the college professors responded that they did teach all or some of these poems because they felt they were important texts in the Catullan collection, they represented essential characteristics of Catullus’ poetry, they did not believe in censoring what the students read, and they provided a “hook” for the students.

The response from secondary level teachers was far more varied, from I do not or would never teach them, to I do teach some of them. For those who did not, some said they would be uncomfortable teaching them, or they thought they would be fired if they did, or they did not want to hear their students use the language contained in them, or they did not feel their students were mature enough to read them, or they thought their shock value overrode any value in teaching them, or they thought them inappropriate for teaching at this level.

However, that was not the only response. One, from an independent school teacher, said she teaches Poem 6 every year because it is hilarious and the kids can handle it; another, from an independent school teacher, said he teaches both Poem 16 and Poem 57. Another, from someone who has taught in various schools over the years, said he sometimes teaches Poem 16 for discussion of the status of sexual threat and invective in Roman culture and ours; another teacher from a public high school said he teaches Poem 16 on occasion because it was more relatable, especially to the boys, than the Lesbia cycle. A number of secondary school teachers said they “referred to” this part of Catullus without including the actual poems in the curriculum. In addition, one mentioned that almost every year a

student finds Poem 16 on his or her own and mentions it.

While this was a very small sampling, it is reasonable to say that college professors, in general, are likely to have no problem including some or all of these poems in their curriculum, while many or most secondary school teachers are. The exceptions, though, are of interest. Clearly there are some secondary school teachers who want to teach this material, feel it is constructive, and do not have opposition to it from their various school constituencies.

I had no desire to alienate teachers who had been successfully using my textbook, but I did want to include in the revision some racier poems that provide a more authentic Catullus. The solution I finally chose was to include the four added Lesbia poems in the revised textbook proper and to write a new tiny textbook for the four more explicit poems. This way, teachers who wanted to expand their teaching of Catullus to the more explicit poems could add the supplement, and those who did not want to or could not include them, would not have to. I felt that this solution provided a needed flexibility in dealing with this material.

My role as a textbook author reminded me that teaching and publication occur in particular contexts. One cannot control one’s readership, just as one cannot control the institutional setting in which books are used. This publication decision I had to make may seem like a small matter, but it was not for me. It involved coming to terms with the Catullus I want to present, but also my desire not to affect teachers negatively by putting them in an awkward or untenable position. One teacher, who represents this concern of mine well, wrote the following about the new little volume on Amazon.com in a customer review: “If you enjoy Catullus’ mainstream poems (in Latin), you will love Dr. Ronnie Ancona’s new supplement. You cannot share these poems with HS students, but they bring an entire new light on reading Catullus at the college level.” I include her review, not because of its positive comment, although of course I appreciate that, but because of its opinion about the unsuitability of the volume for high school students. I know from personal communication with her that such

material would not be approved at her particular school (a large public school in the state of Michigan) for a variety of reasons.

Should I have tried to revolutionize the reading of Catullus in her classroom? Practically speaking, it would not have happened. Her school would have discontinued approval of my book if the more sexually-explicit poems had been incorporated into it. She and her students would then have lost the fairly frequent, but perhaps less obvious, ways in which I intentionally infuse many of my notes with Catullan sexuality, a feature of his writing that is fundamental, in my view. While she is not teaching Catullus at the moment, by keeping the new sexually-explicit poems in a separate volume, she will be able to use my (revised) Catullus textbook again, if she likes.

A completely different response to the possibility of sharing sexually-explicit Catullus poems comes from a Latin teacher at an independent school outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I was invited to talk to his Catullus class, which had been using my original textbook. We had decided before the visit that I would include discussion of a particular poem of my choice (Poem 7, the “other” Lesbia kiss poem). During the visit I shared with the class my dilemma about whether to add the more explicit poems to the book’s next edition and they listened with great interest. On the spot, the teacher then asked if I would mind switching gears to talk about Poem 16 before Poem 7. I was quite surprised, but fine with it, and we went ahead to have what he and I both thought was a productive discussion of Poem 16 with his class. He was pleased with the depth of the discussion, which included separating ancient Roman views of homosexuality from others, examining sexual violence as a means of expressing power, and considering the separation (or lack thereof) between the poet and his poetic persona.^v I did not sense any discomfort from these high school students about discussing this poem, nor did I experience any discomfort myself in discussing it with them.

Clearly there are extremes even at the secondary school level in the United States in terms of what is institutionally acceptable or desirable and / or what is acceptable or desirable to individual teachers. Teachers may really enjoy teaching Catullus to their students and

may have been very successful in doing so, despite differences about which Catullus poems might be workable or permissible for their own classrooms.

I would argue that if one is to teach explicit material, contextualizing it within the poems situates it where it belongs. If it is seen in the context of larger goals for literary study, it is less likely to draw the kind of negative attention that precludes or hinders its inclusion. Let me use Poem 6 and briefly Poems 16 and 32 - these, along with Poem 57, constitute my new tiny textbook - to suggest how I think sexually-explicit content can and should be wrapped into larger issues in Catullan interpretation and appreciation. Teachers at the college level, as well as the secondary level, may find such strategies useful for transforming potentially awkward discussion into productive learning.

Poem 6 (from Thomson, *Catullus*, University of Toronto Press, 1997, italics mine)

Flavi, delicias tuas Catullo,
ni sint *illepidae* atque inelegantes,
velles dicere nec tacere posses.
verum nescioquid febriculosi
scorti diligis: hoc pudet fateri. 5
nam te non viduas iacere noctes
nequiquam tacitum cubile clamat
sertis ac Syrio fragrans olivo,
pulvinusque peraeque et hic et ille
atritus, tremulique quassa lecti 10
argutatio inambulatioque.
nam nil stupra valet, nihil, tacere.
cur? non tam latera *effututa* pandas,
ni tu quid facias ineptiarum.
quare, quidquid habes boni malique, 15
dic nobis. volo te ac tuos amores
ad caelum *lepidu* vocare versu.

Here is my fairly literal English translation (not included in the textbook):

Flavius, you would want to tell to Catullus and would not be able to be silent about your love object, if it were not un-charming and inelegant. But you love some sort of feverish whore. It shames you to confess this. For the bed, silent in vain, fragrant with garlands and Syrian olive oil, shouts that you do not lie down for unaccompanied nights, and this pillow and that equally worn away, and the creaking and walking around of the tremulous bed. For it really doesn't work

to be silent about shameful acts. Why? You would not display such fucked-out flanks unless you were doing something lacking judgment. Therefore, whatever good or bad thing you have, tell us. I want to summon you and your love to the heavens through charming verse.

I introduce the poem in my textbook with the following little paragraph meant to spark thought:

In this poem, the whole notion of “speech” is deconstructed, for beds and bodies “talk,” while people try unsuccessfully to stay silent, and values are upended as seemingly shameful or un-charming things become the subject matter for charming verse. There is a humorous tone to the poem as Catullus wittily shows that he can make good poetry out of anything. Sandwiched between kiss Poems 5 and 7, Poem 6 interestingly manages to be both highly explicit in sexual language and withholding in terms of the specificity of Flavius’ object of desire.

I define *effutuo* as “wear out with sexual intercourse” in my vocabulary entry, and in my notes I add for *non* through *pandas* (line 13):

Not only does Flavius’ bed speak of his activities, but so does the sight of his “fucked-out” body. One can tell what Flavius has been up to just by looking at him. Sights and sounds have meaning, just as words do.

Is the point of teaching this poem to shock students? No. I would add that they are probably far less easily shocked than we might imagine. Is the word *effututa* an important one for the poem? Yes, in part, specifically because of its explicit nature. Isn't half the point of this poem what is explicit and what is not? Part of Catullus’ argument is that without any verbal communication from Flavius, his sexual escapades are laid bare. The personified bed, with its noises, movements, and signs of use, constitute a kind of speech, as does the sight of his body.

The word *effututa* makes very explicit what has been going on, yet the communication is presented as all non-verbal. When we get to the end of the poem (“*lepidu...versu*”), Catullus reveals himself as a poet who is such a master of elegant verse that he wittily shows Flavius that his (Flavius’) inelegance becomes elegance through his (Catullus’) poetic

powers. This is precisely why *effututa* is important. It is essential for Catullus’ playing off (and not resolving) the issues of poetic content and poetic packaging, of primary obscenity and charm, of speech and withholding. What is and is not *lepidus* of course is a recurring social and aesthetic issue for Catullus, starting in Poem 1, line 1: “*cui dono lepidum novum libellum...*”

Teaching Poem 16, with its sexually explicit opening and closing line of invective “*pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*,” can serve as an opportunity for discussing literal and metaphorical language and the significant blurring of the two in this poem. While the line clearly carries the metaphorical sense of “screw you!”, its literalness provides the perfect words for answering the charge of unmanliness. The poet threatens that he will anally and orally screw his critics, Aurelius and Fabullus, playing off the value placed on the active/male (rather than the passive / soft / feminized) sexual position in Roman society. His first person threat collapses the distinction he purports to make between chaste poet and his verses, for he is his verses and they are acting upon his readers. Presented in this light, students can see how specific sexual terms are enmeshed in Catullus’ poetic project.

Finally, in Poem 32, explicit sexual language (the hapax legomenon *fututiones*) can be presented as mock heroic (nine continuous fuckings), leading the way from the charm of “*meae deliciae, mei lepores*” to the explicit and rather hysterical surprise image with which the poem ends of an erection pounding its way through clothing (*pertundo*). Connecting the ending of Poem 32 with, for example, the surprise ending of Poem 13 (*cenabis bene...*), where the addressee will ask the gods to turn him into an entire nose (*totum...nasum*) to smell the mysteriously erotic *unguentum* of Catullus’ girl, can put such explicitness of language and image in the larger context of Catullus’ provocation of his reader, as discussed well by William Fitzgerald (1995) and others.

In conclusion, while for some teaching situations explanation of explicit material at the outset might be useful, I think that seeing such language or imagery in the regular context of reading and interpretation may be more productive. This allows students

and teachers alike to see what this explicitness is – something inextricably tied to other aspects of poetic production. Seen in that light, reading “explicit” Catullus just becomes part of reading Catullus, more generally.

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considering teaching “offensive” literature, whether by Catullus or by any other author. Available on AP Central, the College Board’s AP website, under the English Literature and Composition Resources. McMenomy is a classicist and long-time teacher of Catullus, as well as literature beyond the classics.

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ⁱ This article is a revised version of a talk I gave at the 2014 Classical Association Conference in Nottingham, UK for a panel on teaching sexually-explicit Latin texts. I would like to thank Steve Hunt for co-organizing that panel with me and for inviting me to revise my talk for publication in JCT. Some of the ideas contained here were shared in presentations at the American Classical League Institutes in 2012 and 2013, and in invited talks for the New Jersey Classical Association Fall Meeting in 2013, and for the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 2014. I very much appreciate the feedback I received from these various audiences.

ⁱⁱ OCR AS GCE Classics: Latin, Tuesday 4th June 2013, page 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Material to be tested and questions asked about it are, of course, not the same, as Dr. Nick Lowe, Royal Holloway, University of London, helpfully noted at the panel in Nottingham. Such distinctions are important for discussions which go beyond the scope of this article. My focus here is primarily on texts to be read (or not).

^{iv} I would like to thank all of those who responded to the survey. I have kept individual references anonymous since some teachers likely would not have been comfortable with being identified.

^v The teacher shared with me these post-visit thoughts.

