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To Fabullus (Invitation) by Catullus

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Ranald Barnicot
To Fabullus (Invitation)

Gaius Valerius Catullus
XIII

Fabullus, you'll dine well within a
Week *chez moi*, gods willing,
But make sure you bring a dinner
Ample, tasty, filling.
Also you'll need to contribute
Laughs (the lot!), salt wit and wine,
A girl – mind! – radiantly cute.
Bring these, my charmer, and you'll dine
Well, I say, because yours truly
Has a purse that's cobweb-packed,
But you'll be requited duly:
Pure love's my part in this compact,
Or what's even more becoming:
For I'll present you with a perfume
Of a power suave and cunning,
My sweet girl's gift from love-gods, whom
(Venuses, Cupids, such as those)
You'll petition to metamorphose
You into nothing else but nose.

Commentary

According to St Jerome (mid fourth century to early fifth century CE) Gaius Valerius Catullus was born in Verona in 87 BCE and died at the age of 30 in 58–7 BCE. However, given internal evidence in the poems, this end-date cannot be right, so many scholars have brought the birth-year forward by three years and made it 84 BCE. At any rate, it is the tradition that Catullus died as a relatively young man. His father appears to have been on friendly terms with Julius Caesar, whom, however, Catullus was to lampoon in a number of poems, together with Pompey and their associates. Plutarch tells us that they were reconciled just before Catullus's death, and this is borne out by Catullus's reference to Caesar's conquests in Poem XI.

Catullus was a poet of great wit, power and range (both in theme and in meter). He wrote poems celebrating friendship, mourning his brother, attacking enemies quite viciously and scabrously, recounting Greek legends and expressing his love, at first tender, later bitter and tormented, for his faithless lover, Lesbia, who was probably—though this also is disputed—Clodia Metelli, the wife and later widow of the soldier and politician Metellus Celer.

Poem XIII is both an expression of warm, relaxed, light-hearted affection for a friend, and also, it seems, a love-poem to Lesbia, who is not mentioned by name. Another attractive feature is the poet's ability to laugh at himself (whether we should accept his protestations of penury at face value has been debated). The verse is also elegant and with its several slick elisions—the slurring of final syllables of words that end with a vowel or an *-m* before a following word that begins with a vowel—moves quickly and smoothly towards its conclusion. One has to be careful with this conclusion. Catullus's invitation to Fabullus to imagine himself as nothing but a huge nose may come across as comic and grotesque—see below for the possible sexual interpretation—but I also tried to convey the lyricism. (Also, here's a slight departure from the original. In this Fabullus will make his prayer to the gods in general; in my version he prays to the love-gods who had donated the perfume, although that was no doubt the implication Catullus intended.) Moreover, please note that

“Venuses and Cupids” are to be conceived as a plurality of spirits, emanations from those two deities. There are parallels in some of his other poems such as III and LXXXVIII.

Latin verse is based on quantity (length of syllable) rather than syllable-stress as in English. The verse form in the original is the hendecasyllable, which employs a combination of trochees (long – short), spondees (long – long), with the second foot being a dactyl (long – short – short). To use the same meter in English seemed unnatural and ineffective, so I decided to use short rhyming lines (four quatrains with a concluding tercet), stress-based, rather traditional in style but I hope not archaic. The meters I use are a combination of iambic and trochaic, with two or three dactyls (depending on how line 17 is analysed) thrown in. The number of feet per line varies between three and four. Some lines are catalectic, i.e. with an extra syllable tagged on to the end. This approach may strike some as technical inconsistency, even ineptitude, but I feel it lends my verse a certain unpredictability, which I find attractive. Anyway, in a world drowning in free verse, why should one worry about some slight metrical inconsistency, which at least offsets the rigidity of the rhyme scheme?

This is as follows: ABAB CDCD EFEF GHGH III. It should, hopefully, read like an extended Shakespearian sonnet, though with shorter lines. I like the concluding three rhymes, though some might find them clunky. It is all a matter of ear. Line 18 was inserted to make clear which gods were to be petitioned (see above). “Contribute,” ending line 5, may, according to the dictionary, receive its main stress either on the penultimate or ante-penultimate syllable. The latter, with a secondary stress on the final syllable, gives a smoother rhyme with “cute,” and that’s what I intended.

As to the structure and interpretation of Catullus XIII, Helm (1981) finds it an example of humour *para prosdokian* (Greek), or “contrary to expectation.” There are three jokes: Catullus invites Fabullus to dinner ... but Fabullus must provide the dinner; Catullus’s purse is full ... of cobwebs; the exquisite perfume that Lesbia will provide will, if Fabullus’s prayers are granted, turn him into ... a huge nose!

Is this invitation poem really a bona fide invitation or just a parody of a common classical sub-genre? Many scholars are confident in proposing the latter, e.g.:

“It can be seen that the poem is only nominally addressed to Fabullus; in reality its central purpose is to compliment Lesbia” (Vessey, 1971).

I am not so sure of this. The affectionate tone (and in many poems Catullus shows great affection to his friends) half-persuades me that Catullus is truly addressing him. The situation described is also not that far-fetched. As a modern analogy, I can imagine the modern equivalent of one friend inviting another round for a meal providing he/she stops off at a Chinese takeaway on the way. It happens!

Next, I want to deal with the “revisionist” (term employed by Witke, 1980) sexual interpretation of this poem. Is the nose in fact a penis? Martin (1992) suggests this:

“That transformation is explicitly an erotic one; part of the reason why the poem is so funny is that we recognize in the concentration of Fabullus’s sensuality into a single, enlarged organ, an erection of the nose.”

Going along with this interpretation, if we may, for the time being, what excites the erection? Here is Littman’s (1977) suggestion:

“I suggest that ‘unguentum’ refers to Lesbia’s vaginal secretions which sexual excitement causes to flow.”

And:

“The air of innocence now fades, and the poem becomes concrete, earthy and sensual, like many of Catullus’s other poems.”

And again:

“Whether or not the invitation to dinner is real, Catullus offers Fabullus Lesbia’s genitals to smell. This suggests that since Catullus offers her genitals, he offers the girl,”

I find it quite easy to accept the association of nose with penis; it occurs in many cultures. Did Catullus intend it? Certainly, it may account for the discomfort we may feel, and Fabullus may have felt, although to be turned into a nose would in itself be sufficiently grotesque! It is, I think, a *deniable* interpretation. If questioned, Catullus might have said in response: “Oh, I just meant a nose, nothing else!” Nevertheless, whether we are Freudian or not, sex is a place our minds often go, and Catullus was clearly a highly-sexed young man.

With regard to Littman's thesis, it seems much less plausible. Witke advances several arguments against it. The most cogent of them is psychological: given the extremely jealous and possessive attitude Catullus shows towards Lesbia in other poems, Catullus is unlikely to have "offered" her to any of his friends. Another is cultural: the Romans found bodily effusions and secretions disgusting. Nevertheless, his mind may have gone there, whether as writer or as reader of his own poems. My use of the adjective "cunning" to describe the perfume's power to insinuate itself insidiously into the brain may also have subconsciously reflected this association even before I had read of it. Think of the archaic obscenity "cunny" or the modern one that has replaced it.

However, I do not wish to foist this rather Freudian reading onto you without mentioning that there are other interpretations. For example, Vessey (1977) proposes that the *unguentum* is both a physical perfume-ointment, a conventional contribution to Roman dinner-parties, and the ointment of Aphrodite, which confers *kallos* (beauty). Quinn (1973) says something similar, quoting Propertius 2.29.15–18:

"a reference to the idea that a lovely woman, like a goddess, emitted a special characteristic fragrance, which was her *aura*;"

In all events, the reader must beware of claiming to know Catullus's mind. It is to some extent a mystery to us, as it may have been to him. It is quite possible that the poem is susceptible to different interpretations, equally valid if apparently contradictory. Catullus has loosed the perfume and the nose onto the world, and their significance is now beyond his control!

Finally, let me express my own attitude to poetic translation as applied to this poem. Of course, the translator needs to engage with the original and wrestle meaning from the source poet's words and phrases. But I think that there is a margin, narrow or broad, within which the translator can operate and express his or her creativity. This accounts for my deliberate mistranslation of *paucis ... diebus* (in a few days) as "within a / week," which maintains the alliterated w's and is not *too* far from the original. Also, the greater length of my translation, 19 lines as against 14. This is due partly to the looser structure of English compared to the highly compressed Latin, and partly to

a certain *joie de vivre*, if I may say so, which reflects Catullus's own.

The relationship between translator and source poet is like that between dog and owner, out for a walk together: at times, the dog will pad along at the owner's side; at other times, it will be off exploring on its own account until the owner calls it or pulls on the leash. This tension is in itself creative. The worst mistranslation is the one which may be faithful to the original but is bald, prosy and boring.

Source text:

Quinn, Kenneth. *Catullus: The Poems. Edited with Introduction, Revised Text and Commentary*. 2nd ed., Saint Martin's Press, Macmillan Education Ltd. 1973, text of Catullus XIII p. 9, commentary on XIII p. 135.

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