

Ancient Literature and Language

[SYLLABUS](#)

 [CHAPTERS](#)

 [COURSE DESCRIPTION](#)

 [MAIN PAGE](#)

A Guide to Writing in History and Classics

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Chapter 10: Catullus and the Invention of Roman Literature

I. Hellenistic Literature

A. The History of Hellenistic Greece

The period of Greek history spanning the end of the fourth century up to the Roman conquest of Greece is now called the **Hellenistic Age**. During this time, the Greeks' fortunes went south—or, more precisely, north—as feverish in-fighting gripped their land. After Sparta defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War at the end of the Classical Age, only a few decades later the Thebans turned the tables on the Spartans at [Leuctra](#) and destroyed their leadership. Finally, when all three at last agreed to collaborate, they collectively fell to **Philip II of Macedon** at [Chaeronea](#) in 338 BCE. It was all very depressing, and it would have been more so, were it not for a booming economy.

While the Greeks of the Classical Age had steered the way into the modern age—they had, after all, introduced to the world an astonishing variety of advancements including, among other things, philosophy, drama and, above all, democratic government—their descendants in the post-Classical period gradually lost their forebears' dominion over the arts and sciences and, worst of all, their freedom to outsiders. At the same time, however, these children of the Classical Age were in general living better, longer and, especially, richer lives, more so than any of their predecessors. Still, to judge from their art and literature, these latter-day Greeks weren't on the whole a jolly lot, proving that money doesn't make a person happy, not all on its own at least.

If not individually then, collectively things in **post-Classical Greece** weren't going well on several fronts. Many decades of internal conflict in Greece laid to rest the notion of Hellenic harmony along with the Greeks' sense of inherent superiority over babbling "barbarians." If the victories of the Persian Wars had nourished such concepts, the Peloponnesian War and the century of civil war that followed it starved these ideals to death. Eventually, the

Greeks' domestic disunity led to their enthrallment at the hands of a Macedonian master, succeeded in turn by one foreign despot after another.

The end of their national liberty resulted in much finger-pointing and self-recrimination among the unhappy captives. Almost the worst part of it for these Hellenistic Greeks was that, by any fair estimation of the facts, the loss of their political independence and pre-eminence in the arts wasn't their fault. Like many nations in these times, they were drawn into the greater course of cultural change sweeping across the ancient Mediterranean, processes which were radically reforming the known world. While the Classical Greeks had been instrumental in shaping that development, by the next century so many nations had joined the march toward modernization the Greek-speaking world comprised too small a group to continue making much difference globally. The realization of just how insignificant they really were, exactly how little their opinions actually mattered—or their aspirations or even their lives—*that* was what hurt the most.

As the fourth century came to a close, things were looking no better. In Philip's wake had followed his son **Alexander**, the so-called Great. Then came Alexander's notorious "**successors**," the generals who inherited and squabbled over his domain—a succession of petty foreign tyrants in the eyes of most Greeks—after which it seemed all too clear there was no real hope of returning to the Classical Age, the glorious days of Pericles, Sophocles and the democratic city-state. In the end, most Greeks simply gave up trying to fight for their freedom, and apathy became a national pastime.

The vast majority abandoned politics, too, if for no other reason than that Hellenistic government amounted to little more than kowtowing—bowing to foreign kings and fawning before victorious generals had always been antithetical to the Greek spirit—and withdrew into the safer hospice of nostalgia, the inner world of history, art and literature, and mystical religion. That, in turn, effectively killed the Classical *polis*, the city-state in which citizens banded together to defend their homes and families, to make laws and debate in earnest the nature of right and wrong. All in all, the most gruesome casualty of the fourth century with its torrents of civil strife and foreign conquest was that Greek civic pride suffocated somewhere under the diseased and sprawling corpse of Alexander.

In spite of all this, however, life was never so fine for the Greeks, a brutal paradox. In a world gutted by the Macedonian's sword, trade infected every quarter and individual wealth in Greece reached record highs. But how it happened was damnably un-Greek since, as it turned out, the best way to protect oneself from disaster no longer lay in forging alliances with others, not even with one's fellow citizens, but to look out for Number One—yourself first, foremost and finally only.

Say a marauding general, some pathetic shadow of Alexander's ghost, passed over your land and burned your city and pirates in his wake abducted your neighbor's daughter, but by some lucky chance you and yours emerged unscathed. The only thing for any sensible person to do was buy your neighbor's farm out from under him, make his remaining family your indentured servants and praise the benevolence of the gods—take your pick from the boatload that arrived in town yesterday!—who had spared you his fate. It was an age that saw the real brutality humankind can wreak, not just war and carnage, but cynicism and the overweening greed of a "me generation" whose rewards are measured not by social but personal gain. Indeed, the Greeks had in the end become yuppies.

In the midst of all this, the only vaguely secure place was Egypt, traditionally a haven from violent upheaval because it's insulated on all sides by sea and desert, now a lean-to under which one could find shelter from the hurricane of changing times. There, one of Alexander's generals **Ptolemy**, the only successor general who actually succeeded in establishing a stable dynastic kingdom, founded a tyranny that endured for several centuries (323-31 BCE). Seeking peace and quiet at any price, Greek poets and philosophers fled to **Alexandria**, Ptolemy's capital in the Nile delta, a city Alexander had founded and named for himself.

Eventually, Alexandria supplanted Athens as the center of Greek culture. A new species of Greek arose there, a type of creature less Hellenocentric—that is, less oriented to Greece alone—more urbane and worldly. In symbolic tribute to all this, the great library there fostered a truly international clientele of scholars who opened up their investigations to the whole world and the whole world to their investigations. But by trading in Greece for the entire globe, the Greeks had won a universe and lost themselves.

The Hellenistic world was, in sum, an awful mess, at least from the Greek perspective. The traditional states and kingdoms which had once defined the cultural and political landscape of Greece—and much of the rest of the world as well—lapsed into ruin as Alexander's ravenous successor-generals carved up his domain like hyenas feeding on fresh kill. Nor should it be forgotten that, besides the moral confusion and social upheaval which ensued amidst the free-for-all flowing from the Great Macedonian's deathbed, the sheer volume of bloodshed was unprecedented. Out of this, the modern world was born.

B. The Arts and Sciences in the Hellenistic Age

1. Post-Classical Philosophy: The Search for Garden Walls

This hollow, minor-key finale ending the clarion call of the Classical Age echoes a wider change of values reforming Greek society. No longer were the only gods of Greece the great Olympian deities once seen striding over Homer's Troy and haunting Aeschylus' Argos, those purveyors of light and reason who imposed their inexorable will in order to bring order to a chaotic cosmos. New divinities now took speaking roles and ultimately the protagonist's parts, alien forces like Chance, Ignorance, Luxury and Wealth, all of whom in imitation of the Hellenistic despots in command of earth bestowed their favors indiscriminately. And where such shallow sacred tyrants failed to take root for some reason, there rose—many times more dismal still!—fast-talking philosophers who claimed to answer life's darkest mysteries through logic and critical reasoning. Pseudo-science suited well a pseudo-sensible age.

Among those schools of philosophy was **Epicureanism**, a product typical of its day. The **Epicureans**—so named for their founder, the Athenian philosopher **Epicurus**—preached a doctrine that humans are little more than a haphazard collection of atoms, a loose assemblage of molecular bits which dissolve upon death into nothingness—no soul, no Hades, no justice there or ever. From this they concluded that the enjoyment of life here and now was the only true path to happiness.

Accordingly, Epicurus preached a doctrine of non-involvement, that the best way to live was to remain aloof from others, avoiding politics or participation in any public issue because that can bring only unease and discomfort. Rather, wise men stay at home and contemplate from that safe remove the nature of the world and its true pleasures. So he himself did, fostering the notion of the "**Garden of Epicurus**," a refuge from the stormy streets lying beyond its walls, and many followed the philosopher inside. Its scientific or philosophical merits aside, what Epicureanism actually did was drain Greece of some of its best minds at a time when their involvement was desperately needed, ensuring the hopeless future it seems to assume.

Others less cynical attempted to counteract the despair and apathy around them. For instance, the **Stoics** led by a philosopher named **Zeno** showed how to participate in civic life and still not suffer from its muddy touch. Called **Stoicism**, this philosophy entailed an unemotional approach to life and its endless turmoil, lessons in how to erect a mental "garden wall" which could shield the heart from the vagaries of outrageous fortune. In other words, Zeno taught how to retreat psychologically, but not physically, from mundane affairs, and the result was some of the best politicians and thinkers of the next few centuries. Even if in the end they failed to better their world or change the course of history, at least they tried.

Both Stoicism and Epicureanism are clearly the products of their age. Each has behind it a driving sense of

desperation, the need to cling to something stable as the winds of war and inequity blister the surface of society. Thus for all their differences, it's clear these philosophies emerge out of the same dark swamp, the morass of unrest, anxiety, revolution, and political misery which characterize the post-Classical Age in Greece.

2. Art and Science in Post-Classical Greece

The arts, too, followed suit. Statuary, which during the Classical Age had sought to instruct the viewer serenely by depicting balanced and orderly figures, came in the post-Classical period to focus on *pathos*, extreme suffering. Typical subjects depicted in Hellenistic art include Priam's decapitated head on whose face is frozen the anguish of death's cold embrace, a drunk old woman stooped over with age and pain, and a barbarian who has just killed his wife and is about to commit suicide in order to prevent their capture and enslavement. This procession of horror-movie images reflected all too well the turmoil roiling in the Greek soul during this age. It's ironic, then, that at this time Greek sculptors also achieved their highest level of technical proficiency yet, but skill without heart or a sense of direction doesn't often make for great art.

Paradoxically, too, this period coincides with the greatest age of Greek **science** ever and a burst of technological advancements in various arenas. Greek doctors, for instance, began unraveling the mysteries of the human nervous and circulatory systems. Their colleagues in astronomy proposed that the earth and planets revolved around the sun and calculated with great accuracy a spherical earth's circumference, observations which wouldn't gain the attention of the general public for many centuries to come.

The applied sciences thrived as well. One inventor, **Archimedes** of Syracuse, built curved mirrors and installed them in the harbor of his hometown where they were used to set fire to attacking ships still far out at sea. Another designed a steam engine of sorts though, like the inventions of Leonardo da Vinci, no such machine was ever actually constructed or used. Sadly, this influx of new knowledge and applied thinking served less to help the average Greek live a better life and more to undermine his belief in the sanity of the world.

In the end, such numerous and fundamental changes in life proved overwhelming for many in the day, driving thousands to seek the refuge of a stable environment. As often as not, that asylum took the form of a **mystery cult**, some brand of religion promising the answer to all life's enigmas through the revelation of a great and hidden divine truth. If not better, the solutions which cults like these offered to those facing a rapidly evolving world came faster and easier than any which science or philosophy could hand them. The desperate need for ready, simple answers in the face of tremendous, stupefying change blinded most people who were too disoriented and dizzied by the shifting sands blowing around them to enjoy the harvest of knowledge coming in from all quarters of the globe. These new religions, then, became one more means of shutting out the crowd, of stifling the din and protecting the heart, another way of constructing a garden wall.

3. Hellenistic Literature

With all this, it will probably come as little surprise to anyone that this age also gave birth to the situation comedy, among its more enduring contributions to literature and drama. Whereas in the Classical Age a brand of humorous entertainment called **Old Comedy** had thrived—Old Comedy centered around current events and the satire of well-known public and political figures—Hellenistic times in Athens saw the rise of **New Comedy**, happy-ending plays which featured family situations and dramatic premises focusing on much smaller-scale problems than Old Comedy. To some extent, the playwrights of New Comedy had little choice but to focus on domestic life because, with generals on the move constantly and potential despots loose all over the world, comedians didn't have the freedom of speech their predecessors had brandished in Classical times. Besides, politics in the fourth century just wasn't very funny.

Thus, New Comedies aimed less at garnering laughs and, instead, dealt with how best to raise children, or spend

money, or marry off a son, the average person's dilemmas in life, not some prominent politician's woes. These domestic difficulties presented on stage never failed to resolve happily—as, no doubt, they rarely did in real life—often through the benevolent intervention of some merciful divinity, the type of god many hope against hope exists and actually cares. Such extended exercises in wish fulfillment turned drama into a series of "escape odes" for the Greek public, and the theatre into yet another sort of garden wall.

Across the Mediterranean Sea in Egypt, the situation wasn't quite as bleak. With all the great riches of Egypt at their fingertips, Ptolemy and his successors were free to lavish money on the arts. Eventually, the **Library at Alexandria** came to house not only the greatest collection of literature the world had ever seen but also some of its finest minds. The librarians who worked there were more than just clerks who checked papyrus rolls in and out. They organized the library, gave structure to human learning, oversaw the copying of texts and filled shelf after shelf with their own scientific treatises and volumes of poetry. The library became the first great university of the modern age.

And, of course, if one assembles enough professors in a building, the natural result will be tedious and tendentious debate over esoteric minutia of some sort, in this case, the proper approach to literature and learning. One of the great librarians there, **Callimachus** led a faction of "modernists" who promoted the composition of smaller works of literature, such as short poems and epigrams. In typically succinct fashion, Callimachus summed up his reasoning in what became a famous axiom in the day, *mega biblion mega kakon*, literally "big book big bad," meaning that long works aren't worth the trouble of either writing or reading them. His rival, a poet named **Apollonius**, challenged this notion and wrote in Homeric style a long epic entitled *The Argonautica* ("The Tales of the Argonauts"), a story based on the myth of Jason and the Argonauts. In this work he actually used archaic Homeric language, as if one were to write with "thee" and "hast" today, and Callimachus, of course, hated and criticized it.

But if these scholar-poets shared anything—and both would have forfeited tenure before admitting that—they both suffered from an overly developed love of detail. For example, Callimachus wrote an *epyllion* (literally, "a little epic, an epic-let") entitled *Hecale*, about a minor incident in Athenian mythic history. Not content, however, to focus on such an inconsequential moment in myth, Callimachus narrowed the topic down even further. Instead of telling just the main story of what amounts to a mythological footnote, he spent most of the poem lingering over the noble poverty of the title character, an old woman named Hecale who takes in the hero Theseus on his way to killing the bull of Marathon. Inexplicably—or in light of the age, explicably—the poem was a big hit.

The result was a public willing to commit their leisure time to the exploration of ever smaller worlds of myth, despite the growing one outside their garden gates. In earlier, more restless times, the elaboration of seemingly meaningless detail would have been unimaginable—pre-Classical and Classical Greeks would never have tolerated wallowing in such trivial pursuits—but now there was a large and eager audience for pure escapism. To them, the less the art reflected their reality, the better it was. Times had certainly changed dramatically in Greece, and one more thing in addition made all this possible. By now, much of the Greek world could read.

Thus, with all the other changes happening around them, one could argue that the most significant difference the Hellenistic Greeks encompassed from ages prior was that there was now enough of a reading public to support true **literature**, in the literal sense of word, "written work." Copied out by hand in offices staffed by legions of scribes and paid for with all the money rolling in from abroad, books in manuscript form began circulating around the Greek-speaking world as never before. And the fact that people could sit alone in their rooms or apartments or gardens and read quietly to themselves or aloud with a few close friends altered the nature of Classical literature once more, arguably the most profound change it would ever undergo.

It meant that authors could adopt an intensity of expression never before permissible, because they could assume their public could re-read a passage if they needed to clarify the action or recantulate the plot. or simply for

pleasure—oral poetry and drama had allowed none of this—and thus conciseness, detail and density came to rule in this new brand of entertainment. Moreover, the excellences of true literature were numerous. It could please the ear without ever uttering a sound or captivate the eye without actor, set or purple carpet. The reader's mind was now the biggest theatre in town, and every silent eye a would-be Homer.

Clearly, in the beginning the audience for this sort of literature was not large, though it was invariably that part of society with enough wealth to keep the young art afloat. As time passed, however, and literacy expanded, the reading public grew as well and started to demand more and more material. But it took time, and in that interval the world's attention was drawn yet further away from Greece, this time to the west and a burgeoning civilization which would soon come to rule the known world, **Rome**.

There, the Alexandrian style of literature with its love of small, intense, eminently readable and ultimately re-readable poems bore its greatest fruit, verses written not in the Greek for which this type of poetry was originally designed but in a new language and culture grafted onto Hellenic tradition. As the Romans conquered the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, they quickly came up to speed with the fast-paced world of Hellenistic art, eventually surpassing their teachers and crafting their native tongue **Latin** to suit the subtleties required of modern literary intensity and excellence. And the man who paved the way for all this was a brilliant young Roman love-poet named Catullus.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

Hellenistic Age	<i>pathos</i>
Philip II of Macedon	science
post-Classical Greece	Archimedes
Alexander	mystery cult
successors	Old Comedy
<i>polis</i>	New Comedy
Ptolemy	Library at Alexandria
Alexandria	Callimachus
Epicurean(ism)	Apollonius
Epicurus	literature
Garden of Epicurus	Rome
Stoic(ism)	Latin
Zeno	

II. Catullus and Roman Literature

A. The Rise of Rome

Looking across the early Hellenistic world in the first years of the third century (the 200's BCE), if people in the day had tried to guess which civilization might one day rise to rule all Mediterranean lands, some would surely have pointed to the great wealth of Egypt and others to the enormous empire of Persia, both now in Greek hands thanks to Alexander, or perhaps even to the vast populations of barbarians, the Germans, Gauls, Celts and Goths roaming the lands to the north. But almost no one would have picked Rome which housed a small, rough

population in central Italy, the hinterland of civilization in this day, a people who had all but no literature, economy or pretensions to world leadership. The rise of the **Romans** to unchallenged domination of the lands around the Mediterranean would have seemed all too improbable but, to quote the Roman poet Vergil, "the gods saw otherwise."

In large part, that was because Rome grew the right way, slowly and solidly. Avoiding frantic stabs at conquest like the Athenians' disastrous Sicilian Expedition, the Romans spent more than two centuries (500-265 BCE) conquering their immediate neighbors in Italy and absorbing them into their realm. Those countless years of combat against seemingly insignificant Sabines, Samnites, Oscans and the like not only sharpened the Romans' military machine—and, in particular, their use of an innovative and flexible fighting unit called the **legion**—but also toughened their spirits to the rigors of war. The tales of their early heroes and saviors bear witness to this, centering as they do almost without exception on those who sacrificed themselves in one way or another for the greater good of the state: the raped virgin Lucretia who stabbed herself to death, thus forcing her father to overthrow and oust a lustful tyrant; the patriotic farmer Cincinnatus who set down his plow, fought off an invading enemy and returned to plowing his field; the Horatii triplets all but one of whom died defending the state, and a long litany of generals and soldiers who sacrificed themselves for the greater good.

But in strong contrast to the Spartans, a people no less militaristic, behind the grim exterior of the Roman mental state lay a surprising gift for sound and compassionate leadership. Called the **Republic**, Roman government took the form of a quasi-democratic system run by elected officials who met in a body called the **Senate** ("council of elders"). Though this political system was hardly as democratic as its counterpart in Athens—the early Romans never developed the openness of representation in government embraced by Classical Athenians or their love of art and philosophy—a wide cross-section of the landed gentry and wealthy classes wielded real power in Rome. Thus, the Roman state, at least, responded to those most deeply invested in it, making it possible for the ambitious and talented to rise high in government and allowing Rome to make good use of its brightest minds. Conversely, the traditional monarchies seen more often in the ancient world gave adventurous and intelligent commoners much less access to the corridors of power, thus squandering some of their best human resources.

What really guided and ruled Rome, however, were the large family clans which constituted the real power behind the Senate. Called **gentes** ("tribes"; singular, **gens**), these extended families often embraced hundreds of people and, amidst their competition for political domination and prestige, Roman government maintained a reasonably equitable distribution of power, the checks and balances necessary to address the needs of the state as a whole. In actuality, these **gentes** ruled Rome throughout its history, even after the fall of the Republic and the rise of the Empire, since those emperors who controlled the later Roman state were, in fact, the heirs of two of these **gentes**, the Julii and the Claudii who united and usurped all political and military power from the other **gentes** at the end of the first century BCE. Thus, the so-called Julio-Claudians came eventually to govern Rome solely, making their Empire, in effect, one big—if not happy—family.

The major turning point in Roman history didn't, however, coincide with this later shift in government but took place two centuries earlier, with the greatest military triumph of early Rome, the defeat of the **Carthaginians** who dominated North Africa and much of the Western Mediterranean through their large maritime empire based in **Carthage** (modern Tunisia). The conflict between the Romans and the Carthaginians actually stretched over more than a century, encompassing a series of confrontations called the **Punic Wars**—the Carthaginians were originally colonists from Phoenicia and the Latin term for "Phoenician" is *Poenus*, hence Punic—and this decades-long struggle forced the Romans to change in many ways. To wit, for the first time in their history they had to fight large naval battles, station troops abroad for long periods of time and generally look beyond the immediate borders of their homeland Italy. In the end, it was less important whom they defeated than where they went, because the Punic Wars spelled the end of Roman parochialism and isolation.

From there, it was no long journey to entanglement in Greek, Near Eastern and Egyptian affairs and the slow,

steady domination of the known world. Yet, that conquest proved to be hardly a one-way street. As the Roman poet Horace wryly noted at the pinnacle of Roman supremacy, "Conquered Greece conquered Rome." The paradox of this growing Greco-Roman reality came to center on the explosive issue of **Hellenism**, literally "Greeking," the slow infiltration and cultural usurpation of Roman life by Greek manners, morals and, ultimately, men.

That is, after contact with eastern ways of life had brought to Rome wave upon wave of urbane philosophers, poets and playwrights from the Greek world, there arose a highly educated and sophisticated servant class who lived and preached a lifestyle foreign to the devoutly rustic Romans. This backlash of their military conquests—essentially, an invasion of new learning—eventually precipitated a crisis in Rome, whether to stand by the old, hard-nosed, conservative, traditional Roman ways or to take up the new, exotic, dangerously delightful Greek habits which paraded before them in enticing fashion. The consequence of this dilemma was that many Romans came to see the Greeks as a corruptive force bent upon spoiling their children with outlandish, immoral pleasures and using oriental double-talk to undermine the simple virtues which had made Rome great.

So, in spite of its triumphs abroad, the fabric of Roman society during the late Republic quite literally ripped in two along conservative and liberal lines. Worse yet, these philosophical struggles boiled over into internal military dissension in the first century BCE, and for the first time in their history, Roman met Roman on the battlefield, inaugurating a dismal century known as the **Roman Revolution**. The outcome was nothing less than the destruction of the Republic and the establishment of a more peaceful but essentially autocratic empire. In this case, civil war led to the end of what democracy there was in Rome and, like the Hellenistic Greeks, the Roman citizenry awoke from a century of savage revolution to find themselves in splendid captivity, the bonded servants of a sprawling, luxurious Empire forged of their own blood.

In the movie *The Third Man*, there's a famous joke which goes something like this: "After five hundred years of war and bloodshed Italy produced Dante, Michelangelo, Raphael, da Vinci, Petrarch and some of the greatest art the world has ever seen. After five hundred years of peace and tranquillity, Switzerland produced the cuckoo clock." Too often true in history, bad times parent great art. Much the same could be said of the Pre-Classical Dark Age of Greece and Homeric epic, the Peloponnesian War and Greek tragedy, the conquests of Alexander and New Comedy and certainly also the gruesome demise of the Roman Republic and the Grandeur That Was Rome. In other less comical words, amidst the carnage of the first century (100 to 1 BCE), the Romans generated a body of literature unprecedented in quantity and quality. In other words, sadly for those who lived in the day, it turned out to be a Golden Age.

B. Early Roman Literature

The Romans of the early Republic conceived of themselves as a simple and direct people and, like many conservative groups, were wary of subtle thinking or sensualism. Thus, they shied away from most arts, philosophy and literature which in the opinion of many primitive Romans weakened men. What "literature" there was in early Rome served clear and practical functions: almanacs, collections of prayers for victory or salvation and, as noted above, many stories designed to inculcate virtues like patriotism, strength and bravery. Of course, even in early times there was a liberal underground, people who read books and watched drama and other decadent forms of corrupting arts, but this avant-garde pursued its pleasures for the most part in foreign cities, not in Rome itself. The Roman Senate wouldn't even allow a permanent theatre to be built in their city until 55 BCE, and even then they had to be tricked into permitting its construction.

But the Romans' interest in literature and drama predates the first century by several generations. The movement toward the development of an active Latin literature goes back to the end of the First Punic War (241 BCE), when many Roman soldiers returned home having spent a good deal of their lives in Sicily and southern Italy, lands with large Greek settlements. Exposed as these young Romans were to Greek arts, their generation adopted

a taste for Hellenic epics, tragedies and comedies. Around 240 BCE **Livius Andronicus**, a Greek slave from southern Italy, translated Homer's *Odyssey* into Latin, abruptly shooing the Romans into the high-tech world of international literacy. He also produced Latin translations of Greek plays on temporary stages which were erected for the occasion and subsequently demolished, leaving in their wake, however, a mounting interest among the Romans in theatre. The popularity of these arts eventually forced a reluctant state to recognize them.

Among these early forays into drama and literature, most Roman works depended on Greek sources. After all, why build something when you can steal it? Thus, the first Roman authors forged a career on rendering into Latin the classical tragedies, comedies and epics of Athens. By that day, there had been more than three centuries of Greek dramas written, providing enough raw material to keep Roman translators busy for many decades. The more imaginative and talented of these adapters, of course, began to pad out the **Greek originals** with their own inspirations. Comic playwrights, especially, found they needed to rework the plays for the new age and audience —comedies can't afford to be hidebound and archaic the way some types of tragedy can—and so they "Romanized" their Greek originals, beginning the long, slow process toward an independent literature at Rome.

In one manifestation of this growing Hellenism, Roman authors divided themselves sharply into separate camps: those who imitated the Greeks, and those who stood staunchly by the old, conservative Roman ways of thinking and writing. And from this controversy were born two very different approaches to literature: a faction who cultivated the native Roman spirit, giving rise to genres such as satire; and a faction who followed Greek literature in spirit and fostered a type of poetry which adopted the values of Hellenistic literature with its focus on shorter lyrics and the *epyllion*. The latter eventually won this war.

Such Hellenized writers were called **neoteric** ("newer, more modern") poets, and their number includes virtually all the great Latin poets of the Classical Age of Rome: Catullus, Vergil, Horace, Ovid and other poets who saw themselves as importing the literary traditions of Greece into Rome. The greatest accomplishment of these authors, however, is not that they successfully brought Hellenistic refinements to Latin audiences but, in the process of blending Greek and Roman cultures, they forged a wholly new brand of literature. By rising above the petty controversies swirling around Hellenism, their genius and poetic excellence opened human expression to a scope and scale greater than ever seen before.

C. Catullus

In the last century before Christ (100-1 B.C.), as the fires of the Roman Revolution ignited and began to consume souls, poets like all those around them grew hardened to catastrophe but, at the same time, were also better-traveled and more cosmopolitan in outlook. As the veil of cynicism shrouded their world, it made the traditional myths of primordial Roman virtue laughable to many, hardly tolerable to hear anymore. Thus, Hellenistic-style escapism soared in popularity for much the same reason it had arisen centuries before in Greece. Reality was simply too gruesome to bear.

One of the earliest and certainly the most important of these neoteric poets was **Catullus**. Born into the upper crust of provincial society in the Italian city of Verona, Gaius Valerius Catullus came to Rome as a young man to make his fame and fortune. The former he achieved; the latter he didn't. While still maintaining a good lifestyle by the standards of his day—or any day, for that matter—Catullus seems to gripe constantly in his poems about his personal poverty, surely only destitution by the standards of the high aristocratic circles in which he traveled. He certainly had the leisure and means to write several books of poetry, and with that, the Classical Age of Latin literature was under way.

D. Poem 63: Attis

1. Introduction

Called the "most remarkable poem in Latin," Catullus' **Poem 63** is a study in extremism and disillusionment painted against a backdrop of myth and ecstatic worship. It puts words to one of life's ineffable mysteries, the enduring lure of religious fanaticism, in this case, framed within the story of a Greek man who falls under the spell of a foreign cult, runs off to Asia Minor and wakes to find himself less of a man than he was before. By modern standards, it could serve as an allegory for many of the problems facing youth today—drug addiction, in particular—though the poet himself almost certainly saw it as a fable centering on the charms and dangers of embracing a Greek way of life. In this way, it speaks to his day and at the same time all ages.

The meter of the poem is one of the most unusual and inimitable in Western literature. It is called **galliambics**, meaning literally "the iambics of the *gallae*"—*gallae* is the name for the priests of Cybele—and goes something like this: da da DUM da DUM da DUM DUM (pause) da da DUM da da da da da [the half lines are separated into columns in the translation below]. The flurry of short syllables which come at the end of each line—short syllables are unstressed and take less time to say—was said to reflect the clash of cymbals often used in the ecstatic ceremonies of Eastern religions. Here, it seems to reflect also the confused minds of the worshipers and the whirling of their thoughts as they drive themselves further and further into the delirium of cultic ecstasy.

2. Poem 63

The story of Catullus poem centers on a man named **Attis** who sails east from Greece across the Aegean Sea to Asia Minor to become a priest of the earth-mother goddess **Cybele**. His initiation into her priesthood entails the act of emasculation which he performs on himself in a state of ecstatic delusion. He then wakes in horror to see what he's done and longs for his past life, a world to which he can now never return.

In order to grasp the historical significance of this poem, it's important to understand the history of the cult Catullus is describing. The goddess Cybele is a Phrygian (Trojan) deity whose worship was imported to Rome at the end of the third century BCE during the Punic Wars. Called in Latin *Magna Mater* ("Great Mother"), her presence was credited by many in the day with granting Rome victory over Carthage, which, in turn, lent the cult great prominence and prestige, that is, until the Romans discovered the ecstatic nature of Cybelan worship, the frenzied behavior it called for and, especially, that its priests were eunuchs. By the time a sober Senate tried to curb the excesses of Cybele fanatics, it was too late. The new religion was firmly rooted in Roman soil, where it would grow and flourish for centuries to come.

According to Greek myth, Cybele was born when Zeus had a wet dream while sleeping on Mount Dindymus in Asia Minor. She arose from the ground which had been saturated with his semen and initially had both male and female organs. Aghast at such a peculiar creature and worried about what it might do upon reaching maturity, the gods decided to cut off its male members and made Cybele a female deity. From the discarded and dismembered genitals grew an almond tree.

Later Nana, the daughter of the river Sangarius, put the fruit of this tree in her lap and became pregnant. As young unwed mothers in antiquity often did, when she gave birth to her child, she exposed it on a mountainside. However, the child, a boy called Attis, survived and grew up in the wild. One day the goddess Cybele saw Attis—she was his father, in a way—and fell in love with him, but he rejected her for another. Enraged, Cybele struck him mad and drove him to castrate himself after which he died. In remorse, Cybele turned him into a pine tree.

Catullus has taken and reshaped this myth, creating a modern, neoteric version of the ancient tale, a new account which is both different and similar to its forebear. For instance, both myth and poem feature Attis' self-castration, gender-bending and roaming amidst the woods of Asia Minor. Catullus' innovations, however, are hardly fewer and perhaps more beguiling. The Roman Attis is mortal, no longer a goddess' offspring but instead a mere Greek

followed my footsteps,
 up the gangway, onto the cutter,
 heedless of turbulent surf,
 the ocean's sullen rage, and
 you unmanned your flesh
 in fanatic hatred of Venus: now,
 with steps swift and far-ranging,
 fill our Mistress with ecstasy!
 Slow hesitation must slip from your minds.
 Come with me, follow me,
 20 on to Cybele's Phrygian abode,
 the Phrygian grove of the Goddess
 where gongs give clamorous tongue,
 where tambourines rattle response,
 where Phrygians coax low notes
 from their oboes' flaring bells,
 where Maenads fling back manic heads,
 brows entwined with ivy,
 where, with piercing shrieks,
 they shake the sacred insignia,
 25 where the Goddess's wandering troupe
 delights to swoop—
 there must we hasten,
 dancing our swift tarantellas!"

And when, to *her* companions,
 Attis the sham woman sang,
 at once they raised a cry,
 ululating tongues aflutter,
 tambourines bellowed in rapid response
 and hollow gongs clashed,
 30 feet beat a quick riff as revelers
 tore up Ida's green slopes.
 Delirious, panting, reeling, *she* went
 rushing at once through
 shadowy groves, a tambourine in attendance;
 fighting for breath,
 forcing *herself* to lengthen *her* loping stride,
 Attis surged ahead
 like an untamed heifer
 shying away from the onerous voke:

far from my nose

*may You keep Your madness, my Lady:
drive other men wild,
other men drive to this frenzy!*

Although with a poem so imaginative and allusive one can never be really sure of anything, it appears Catullus wants the reader to see Attis in one way as a metaphor for the poet himself. So much of the rest of Catullus' poetry concerns his life, it's hard to believe this doesn't, too, on at least some level. For instance, like Attis, the Roman poet has abandoned his native land and its traditions and looked eastward for satisfaction and inspiration. In adapting his Latin genius to Greek modes, Catullus looks much like Attis, since both left their home and headed east: Attis from Greece to Asia Minor, and Catullus from Rome to Greece. Moreover, the equation of poetic inspiration and madness was a common one in antiquity, so it's easy to read Attis' delirium as Catullus' drive to write verse.

With this, then, Attis' castration may be taken to represent the ineffectuality of the poet Catullus at Rome where poetry—and especially Greek-style poetry—was seen as an attractive pastime but, in the end, an unmanly, "un-Roman" profession. So, again like Attis, Catullus has fled to the East, figuratively castrated his Roman-ness and now looks back tearfully to his homeland, knowing there's no going back. Thus, the poem may be his way of saying, now that he's tasted the apple of Greek knowledge and discrimination—which is an apple of discord, too—he can never again return to being the simple, rustic Roman he was born. That would make the prayer at the end of the poem, "Cybele, never make me mad like Attis!," particularly poignant, since Catullus has already become mad with poetic inspiration and is now lost forever in the eastern wilderness of Hellenistic verse, the way so many of his compatriots must have felt in their Greco-Roman day. Little wonder, then, this poem was so popular.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

Romans	Livius Andronicus
legion	Greek originals
Republic	neoteric
Senate	Catullus
<i>gentes/gens</i>	Poem 63
Carthage/Carthaginians	galliambs
Punic Wars	Attis
Hellenism	Cybele
Roman Revolution	

CHAPTERS

[SYLLABUS](#)

[COURSE DESCRIPTION](#)

[MAIN PAGE](#)

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