

READING

Gāius Valerius Catullus (who lived from approximately 84 to 54 BCE) is one of the greatest Latin poets, and the best known among the neoteric, or “new” poets of the first century BCE. They modeled their works and literary personalities on those of Greek writers from the Hellenistic era (third and second centuries BCE). Among them is Callimachus, best remembered for the phrase *Mega biblion, mega kakon*, “a big book is a big evil.”

Catullus also places a distinctive stamp on what he writes by giving voice to his own emotions, frankly and often bawdily. Many of his poems treat his passionate and often painful love affair with a woman whom he calls “Lesbia,” in homage to the literary achievements and sensibilities of the sixth century BCE Greek female poet Sappho. The name “Lesbia” is evidently a metrically equivalent pseudonym for Clodia, a Roman matron from a politically powerful family.

Several historical figures from the turbulent period in which he lived—Caesar and Cicero among them—figure in Catullus’s poems, both those in lyric meters and those in the elegiac couplet.

His elegies greatly influenced the love poetry of Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid, who wrote during the principate of Augustus (27 BCE–14 CE), and whose work in turn had a major impact on the romantic poetry of the Middle Ages. Like Catullus, they characterize erotic passion as a form of enslavement, referring to the female beloved with the term *domina*, meaning “mistress of slaves.” So, too, they emphasize the obstacles to the fulfillment of their desires, ranging from jealous husbands and rivals to locked doors and other forms of physical separation.

DĒ AMŌRE

- 1 Puella mea passerem habet. Ō, passer, dēliciae meae puellae! Cum passere puella mea lūdit, passerem tenet, passerī digitum dat, digitus ā passere mordētur. Puella nārrat sē passerem amāre. Puella passerem plūs quam oculōs amat. Nam passer est mellitus. Catullus videt
- 5 passerem esse semper in gremiō puellae. Passer ad dominam semper pīpiat. Catullus tamen vult cum puellā esse et ā puellā amārī. Itaque Catullus passerī invidet. Tū, puella, Catullum amāre dēbēs, nōn passerem. Senēs autem sevērī putant puellam Catullum amāre nōn dēbēre. Verba senum, puella, ūnīus assis aestimāre possumus. Nam vīta
- 10 nōn est longa.

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