

What qualities have made Catullus a successful poet throughout the ages?

The legacy of Catullus has survived through the ages for a number of reasons that still make him a widely renowned and successful poet. Indeed, the very assumption that Catullus is a 'successful' poet may be debated, but the supposition has firm foundations due in large to the fact that we are still reading his poetry two thousand years later. Literary critics generally split the works of Catullus into two main parts, suggesting a lyric Catullus, the master of emotional verse, and a more learned Catullus, the disciple of Alexandrianism. This essay will concentrate on the former Catullus, and the qualities of sophistication and verbal artistry that have made him a successful poet throughout the ages.

Subject matter is the vital basis on which a great poet can build, and Catullus uses this as a key vehicle to explore the limits of friendship and love. Catullus' approach to love is one that modern day readers can easily identify, and this is vital to its success. This is particularly evident in Poem 2 "Passer" where the reader learns of Catullus' jealousy of this insignificant animal, the sparrow. Indeed, he states "*Tecum ludere sicut ipsa possem*" ("I wish I could play just as she does with you") reveals that despite the surface of a humorous recount and the possible amusing sexual connotations of sexual tension of the sparrow, there is a rather sad and wistful undercurrent that the reader can identify.

This use of subject matter can further be seen in Poem 8 as the progression of Catullus' emotion as he moves from a resolved mindset, through the repetition of "*obdura*" ("stand firm") and "*iam Catullus obdurat*" ("now Catullus stands firm") to an insecure and doubting of his position, in which he questions now only Lesbia, but also himself. Perhaps the success of Catullus is what poet communicates is not the depiction of a particular scene, but rather the unwinding of his thoughts in a situation we remember from our own comparable experiences. Taken alone, the subject matter must be sufficient to assess the success of Catullus, as E.A. Barber states, "*The Lesbia cycle cannot be paralleled in ancient literature for sincerity of passion, passing*

through all the stages of joyous contentment, growing distrust, and wild despair to the poignant adieu of the disillusioned lover"¹. This is however to be frankly very limiting in understanding the true worth of Catullus' poetry.

The majority of qualities that have made Catullus such a successful poet, however, have been gleaned from the great Hellenistic poet Callimachus, and other significant literary precedents. The poems were characterised by "brevity, polish, wit and learning" and this is deeply embedded in Catullus' poetry. A.L. Wheeler states how "*Catullus, and many of his contemporaries neglected that part of their heritage which was Roman ... When he sought aid from the past; he turned directly to the Greeks.*"

Catullus uses wit and general verbal artistry at the forefront to his poems to illuminate the subject. This is especially evident in Poem 7, through the hyperbolic answer to "*Queris, quot mihi basiationes / tuae, Lesbia, sint satis superque?*" ("You ask how many of your kisses will be more and enough for me?"). Furthermore, embedded in this answer are the made-up polysyllabic words "*lasarpiciferis*" ("asafoetida bearing") and "*basiationes*" ("kissifications") which reveal the extent of Catullus' wit and humour, but also the qualities for success.

Secondly, brevity plays a significant role in Catullus' verbal artistry in concisely depicting a poetic scene. This is of course most noticeable in the epigram Poem 85 "*Odi et amo*", but the conciseness of the majority of Catullus' poetry reveals a personal, even sometimes playful, side to his character. Even his longer poems (still much shorter than a Homer epic!) bear some relation to this integral quality.

The last Callimachean trait that is vital to Catullus' success is polish, by which I mean the syntactical balance, and the completeness of the poem taken as a whole. This polish is best seen in Poem 8, in which Catullus attempts to use the discipline of verse to see more clearly. The lines in this poem are beautifully balanced and weighed, such as Line 9 "*nunc iam illa non vult; tu quoque impotens noli*" ("Now she doesn't desire no more: you should also not desire, weak one") in which we notice how the line is masterfully split in two with the caesura occurring after the word "*vult*". This

¹ E.A. Barber, article on 'Catullus' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

balance repeats during the ending of the poem with the six rhetorical questions concluding the polish. The qualities of brevity and polish augment interest in Catullus' poetry and hence make him successful.

It is not enough however to assume that simply because Catullus has used the characteristic traits of Callimachus that those qualities will make him a successful poet. As a literary critic declared, "*A poet's greatness rests largely on the extent to which he is able to construct a synthesis of preceding traditions while producing something not achieved before*". This is exactly what lies at the heart of Catullus' success throughout the ages. Take, for instance, Poem 8 in which he addresses the poem to himself, Catullus, - "*miser Catulle*" - a technique that has countless literary precedents. However the real skill of Catullus is how he absorbs the tradition and then invests it with a new purpose, such as using the addressed self to instigate a more private subtle self-analysis of his emotions.

This idea is also clearly exhibited in Poem 51, with the foundation of the poem being that of Sappho's, described as the 10th Muse. Through careful alterations of the text, such as "*si fas est, superare divos*" ("if it is lawful, seems to be superior to the gods"), Catullus has added his own style and motifs, such as superstition. The ability for Catullus to adapt the great literary precedents to his own distinctive style makes him compelling to read, and perhaps this should be seen as one of his most important qualities that have made him so successful throughout the ages.

The final quality that has made Catullus successful is his battle against the problem of expression. This is possibly one of the surest tests for a poet in the attempt to find just the right words for which he deeply experiences, but which eludes expression. Poem 83 could be an example of such an occurrence, and there are signs that this problem of expression may have become more fascinating than the woman who had made him aware of the problem's existence. An example of this struggle could be cited at the end of Poem 83, with "*hoc est, uritur et loquitur*" ("This is it, she burns and she talks") since Catullus is showing the reader evidence of Lesbia's feelings, not sure how it translates to his own. There is none of the traditional superficiality of past love poems, but yet Catullus has discovered the battle that he might fight against

elusive expressions of emotion, a battle which all great poets must participate courageously.

To conclude this essay into the qualities that have made Catullus a successful poet throughout the ages, it is useful to dwell upon the impact of Catullus on literature and verse. The succeeding Latin poets, such as Horace and Ovid, were undoubtedly influenced by Catullus' creation of a new type of love poetry. Indeed, I would argue that to fully understand Catullus, the reader must regard him not as an isolated incident, but as a precursor of a new kind of poetry. Likewise, English literature has used Catullus as a foundation, such as the poets Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe writing imitations of his poems, including Poem 5. John Milton, another Catullan imitator, spoke of Catullus' "*Satirical sharpness, or naked plainness*" as a source for inspiration. The verbal branches of Catullus have therefore found roots in past and present literature, and this is a definite sign of his success as a poet.

To answer fully the question of what qualities have made Catullus successful would require an examination must broader and more thorough than that which can be done in an essay. However, I feel that the most significant qualities have been highlighted in the course of this composition, not least how Catullus is still relevant in modern society. His sophistication and verbal artistry enable Catullus to use the subject matter of love as a means for communication for not only the depiction of a subject, but also the development of his emotional thought processes. His poetry can be seen not so much as the description of the outcome of a thought process, but as a record for the process itself. Catullus absorbs past traditional techniques and characteristics into his poetry giving it his distinctive witty flavour. In short, Catullus achieves his well-deserved success as a result of a variety of qualities still recognisable in the poet of today.