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A Statement of Independence in Catullus 51

This paper stems from a longer study in my dissertation in which I place Catullus into the larger context of Roman translation. To that end, I examine poem 51, set here in handout item one. Scholars have long recognized that Catullus 51 is a translation of Sappho (*fr.*31 Voigt). The translation aspect in itself is not surprising: there are other poems of Catullus that are wholly or partially translations, and so one more is hardly reason for comment. Yet this poem receives a great amount of attention due to its final stanza, in which Catullus apparently abandons the translation project. Before I examine the poem in more detail, I will note here that scholars have found many ways to quell their discomfort with the abruptness of the change between the third and fourth stanzas, including (but not limited to) excising the final stanza from the previous three completely. As I propose, the final stanza is crucial to not only the poem, but to the poet himself.

The statement that Catullus makes in the finale of 51 is one of independence from his source. This poem, as a translation, provides valuable insight into how Catullus views his role as a Roman translator. Using evidence primarily from Catullus 51, but also from poems 50, 65, and 66, my primary concern in this paper is in determining how much Catullus is willing to borrow from his sources, and what he believes this borrowing says about him as a poet. Other Latin authors such as Horace and Cicero make their views on this subject quite clear. As we see in handout item two, Horace famously tells his audience in the *Ars Poetica* that it is better for a poet to bring into performance something from the *Iliad* (128 – 129) than to be the first to offer something unknown and previously unsaid (130). He qualifies this advice with the warning that public material, which here refers to widely- known themes of literature, will become personal property (131) only if the writer does not tarry around the common and easy path (131–132). Horace further remarks that this success will belong to the poet who does not concern himself with translating word-for-word like a faithful translator (133–34), nor leap like the imitator into the narrow straits (134). Such a place, Horace warns, is where either shame or the law of the genre forbids advancing (135).

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Horace's commentary provides insight into that poet's translation methodology, but in the case of Catullus, for whom we lack such explicit commentary, we are required to examine those poems which are clearly recognizable as translations, namely poems 51 and 66. To return to handout item one, for the first twelve lines of poem 51, Catullus closely follows the Sapphic original. He alters a few aspects of the text but overall he does not stray from the thread of the Sapphic poem. As Sappho did, Catullus views his love interest from across the room; both poets are taken aback at how well their lover's partner remains composed at the side of such a beauty and surmise in their opening line that the lover must be equal to a god. Both poets describe the effect that the lover's beauty has on their person: the subject loses his voice (Catullus 7–9 = Sappho 7–9); passions settle in under the limbs (Catullus 9–10 = Sappho 9–10); and the eyes go dark (Catullus11–12 = Sappho 11). The two poems are so close in structure that it indeed seems difficult to imagine that any learned reader would fail to recognize the Sapphic source.

We should also consider the variations introduced by Catullus. Notable among these are: *ille, si fas est, superare divos* of line 2; *identidem* in line 3; the *misero quod omnis* / *eripit sensus mihi* of line 5 and 6; and especially the vocative *Lesbia* in line 7. Scholars have put forth various explanations for these additions: Richard C. Jensen (1967: 364) supposes that phrases such as *si fas est* suggest themselves only to the Roman poet; Douglas. S.F. Thomson (1997: 327) believes that the *misero* is employed to introduce the masculine gender and "change the poem's direction;" Kenneth Quinn (1972: 59) contends that the vocative address in *Lesbia,* despite there being nothing that corresponds to this in the original, still "had every right to be there." Yet these are all minor changes that may reflect the particulars of Catullus' situation, but do not illustrate Catullus' position as a translator.

For indications of this position, we must look more closely at the part of Catullus' poem that shifts away from translation, specifically the final four lines. Catullus personalizes this poem when he suddenly breaks off the description of his love-sickness. By a self-address in the vocative in line 13, he cautions himself that *otium* is a

problem for him. He reproves himself with the censure of line 14 "too greatly do you delight and spend time in leisure." This self-admonition subsequently becomes the theme of the remainder of the poem. No longer does Catullus follow the thread started by Sappho, but instead deviates into a conversation with himself, and not with the self as a lover, but as a poet. He ends with his warning in lines 15–16 that *otium* has the power to destroy even kings and blessed cities.

The question that has stymied scholars is what this last stanza, and specifically the reference to *otium,* has to do with the rest of the poem. The problem is further complicated by the fact that this is actually two questions: not only are we asking how are the sentiments expressed in the *otium* stanza related to the rest of the poem, but also, why does Catullus apparently stop translating? Scholars have proposed various theories on the latter question: Thomson (1997: 329) presents a variety of reasons, two of which concern the feminine vocabulary of Sappho's text and Catullus' apparent inability to work with this vocabulary. Some scholars, such as C.J. Fordyce (1961: 219), argue that the final stanza simply does not belong to the poem, that its appearance with the first three stanzas is an error in the manuscript tradition.

Thomson's argument is unconvincing because it neglects the possibility that Catullus would manipulate gender roles for poetic effect; while Fordyce's suggestion is valid in that it creates a unified *Carmen* 51, it does not satisfactorily explain what we are to do with the *otium* stanza. I therefore offer an alternative explanation on why Catullus ends his translation, and why the portion that is not translation features a description on the perils of *otium*. I contend that Catullus makes a forceful statement in this final stanza about how he defines himself as a poet. As I observed above, in the first three stanzas Catullus is not only displaying his persona in the relationship with Lesbia, but as the author of the poem, he is also translating. As we read the poem, we are aware of both Catullus the lover who is depicted in the narrative, and Catullus the poet, here acting as translator. The fourth stanza marks the departure point not *only* from the narrative of his feelings for Lesbia, but even from the literary

act of translating. This is the moment at which Catullus depicts himself ceasing from his translation and alters the direction of the poem so that he can then comment upon what he has written. In the final stanza, then, Catullus the poet is no longer writing about Catullus the lover, but rather about Catullus the translator-poet.

To return to the other issue with this final stanza, what is the risk of *otium*? I would argue that Catullus is here referring to the widespread Roman sentiment that certain acts were appropriate for times of *otium*, and a different set belonged to *negotium*. For a Roman, activities suited to *negotium* generally consisted of acts that benefited the state, but perhaps more specifically, public political duties. Yet I propose that Catullus, a *doctus poeta,* recognizes a somewhat more personal definition of *otium* and *negotium*. Of course, he is not the only author of the Late Republic to fashion a personal meaning for *negotium*. In the preface to Sallust's *Catiline*, that author explains why it is an appropriate act for a Roman to write, thus attempting to eschew the regular political path and thereby excuse his failure in that sphere. In his own words (2.9): "in the great abundance of affairs, nature reveals a different path to different people." He writes that he was drawn to political affairs in his youth, yet he left that life due to the corruption in the political system. In handout item three we see that Sallust, after his mind had rested from miseries and dangers, decided to spend his remaining time out of public affairs, and claims that it was not his intent to waste his *bonum otium* in inactivity and leisure. Rather, he decided that he would use his *otium* to write. In handout item four Sallust shows that he now classifies writing history as *negotium* in the opening to the *Jugurtha* (4.1–5). Here he notes that among those occupations (*negotia*) which are administered by the mind, the writing of history is especially serviceable. Still, in the second part of handout four he shows that he is aware that his work may be discounted when he laments that some will assign the name of inactivity on his great and useful task because Sallust decided to spend his life away from public affairs. He thus acknowledges a common classification of writing as a task fit for *otium*, and his preface sets out to dispute this notion.

Of course, these prefaces are special pleading on the part of Sallust who was a political failure, yet Sallust shows how a Roman writer could reasonably fashion a personal definition of *negotium*. Consequently, we can see how Catullus may have viewed writing poetry as a part of his *negotium* in the same fashion that Sallust categorized his historical writing. Yet I wish to take this idea one-step further and assert that Catullus considered the writing of only *original* poetry as part of his *negotium,* while fashioning literal translations[1] was an activity for *otium.* There is some indication of this in the other poems of Catullus, specifically in *Carmen* 50, which several scholars, such as John.F. Finamore (1984), Julia.H. Gaisser (2009) and David Wray (2001), recommend be read as the companion piece to poem 51. Let me draw your attention to handout item five. Here we see that poem 50 opens with reference to the activities of *otium,* specifically "yesterday, Licinus, while at leisure we played much on my writing tablets," Recall that 51 closes with another reference to *otium*. As companion pieces read together, everything that falls between the opening of poem 50 and the finale of 51 would therefore be a part of Catullus' creation while at leisure. We must be aware that the portion of poem 51 that is a literal translation falls between the two *otium* markers from the two poems. When Catullus calls for himself to cease from *otium* and *otiosa,* he simultaneously ends his translation. I do not believe that this simultaneous cessation of *otium* and translating is a coincidence, and I take it as evidence that Catullus classified translating as something *otiosum.* I offer one example from outside the poetic sphere, though contemporary to Catullus, to support my theory that this was a valid classification among Romans of the Late Republic.

In the opening to his *Academica,* written in 45 BC, Cicero confronts Varro with the following: "I ask why, although you write so much, you pass over this subject of philosophy, especially since you yourself excel in it, and zeal for it and the entire subject far surpasses all other studies and arts." Varro offers a lengthy explanation, which culminates with this point (and this is handout item six): "For when I saw that philosophy had been most

[1] In my larger research project, I have identified three modalities of Roman translation activities: the literal, the allusive and the independent. In general, the literal translator closely follows his source; the allusive translator includes references to his source while still striving to create something new; and the independent translator attempts to replace his source material with his own writings. Here we see Catullus rejecting the literal modality, choosing rather to write in the allusive system.

diligently set forth in Greek literature, I decided that if any of our citizens were held by an interest of that subject, and if they were learned in Greek teachings, they would rather read the Greek than our (Latin) writings; but if they were averse to the Greek arts and teachings, they would not care for even philosophy which they cannot understand without Greek instruction." Cicero (1.3.10) questions this line of reasoning, but admits that he himself in handout seven, while ambition, offices, court cases, and not only the interests but even the administration of the Republic held him involved and bound in many duties, he kept these studies confined, and he only revived them while permitted by reading them, lest they fade away. I stress, he only *read* philosophy. Now, however, he can turn his mind to philosophy – to writing philosophy, which so often in Cicero and philosophical writing means *translating* – and this he can do partially because of his daughter's death and also because he has been freed from taking part in public affairs. As he says, this seems to him a most honest delight of his *otium*. Therefore, Cicero too recognizes translating as an activity suitable for *otium*. I propose that Catullus follows a similar classification of translating. In poem 51 Catullus is not telling himself to abandon the leisurely pursuit of poetry, but to put aside translating and aspire to perform what is the Roman poet's duty and create original poetry.

In Catullus 66, which scholars including Thomson (1997: 447) and Fordyce (1961: 328 -329) generally agree to be a literal translation of Callimachus's *Lock of Berenice* (*fr.*110.1 Pfeiffer) there is additional evidence that Catullus considered translating to be a task for *otium*, and thus acknowledged that there were negative aspects of translating literally. Overall, Catullus uses Callimachus' poem to express his own sentiments, and he appears to alter very little of the language and theme of the original. The question then becomes, why does he not stop himself from translating too closely, as he did in poem 51? On one hand, it would be easy to answer that the aspirations of creative variety would prevent him from following the same formula in two different poems, yet this does not quite satisfy the question. Fortunately, we can find more information about poem 66 in its apparent companion, *Carmen* 65.

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Here let me draw your attention to handout item eight. Poem 65 opens with something of an explanation of the circumstances for the writing of poem 66. Catullus begins with a conjecture, explaining that *even though* pain keeps him, continually consumed by grief, removed from the learned maidens, and in such a state that his soul is unable to use the sweet fruits of the Muses (3 – 4), he is still writing to his friend. Catullus continues to describe the conditions of poem 66 as he explains that even in this pain (15), he will send a poem of Callimachus translated literally. The verb that Catullus uses (*exprimere*) to describe the process is significant in that it indicates that the translation forthcoming will be literal.[2] Thus, Catullus designates the accompanying poem 66, but that he does so at the end of his description of grief is important. The sequence is more than just "Even though I am crushed by the grief of my brother's death, I am still sending you this poem because I love you." Rather, he is explaining *why* he is sending a *carmen* that is *expressum* from *Battiadae.* He cannot bring himself to write something original *because* he is beset by grief; thus, in order to satisfy Hortalus' request he sends a translation. The background to the writing of poem 66, which is revealed in its companion 65, supports the conclusion that Catullus recognized a division between translation and original creation and furthermore categorized translation as the activity of *otium*. The self-rebuke of poem 51 is the same recognition of translation as not wholly appropriate or satisfying, and thus the reproach is a call for the poet Catullus to proclaim his independence from his source.

As a final note on poem 51, let me emphasize Catullus' poetic skill by noting that if we are *not* aware of the source text, the importance of the self-rebuke is not evident. It becomes obvious to us only when we know what Sappho does with the subject, and then subsequently witness Catullus break away. When we are aware of the allusion, we understand how Catullus is engaging in the act of translation. He follows in the footsteps of Sappho only up to a point, and at the point of departure we glimpse his ability to make a poem his own.

[2]Cicero uses the phrase *verbum e Graecis expressum* to indicate a literal process when describing Latin plays translated from Greek versions (*Fin*. 1.4 – 5).

Poem 51, and its subject matter, thus stands as Catullus' independent project and it is through knowledge of that source material that we understand the methodology at work here. The problem that Catullus identifies in the final stanza of 51 is less that he may lose himself as a Roman man in his burning love for Lesbia, but rather that he may lose himself as a Latin poet in his literal translating of source material. The only cure would be to produce something original or, as Horace will later recommend, make familiar material the personal property of the poet. The warning is the vehicle for Catullus' statement of independence. It is part of Catullus' genius that he makes his statement of independence the original portion itself. Thereby Catullus makes the subject his own, and establishes his relationship with not only his Lesbia, but with Greek literature as his source in general.

1

Sappho, *fr.* 31 (Voigt)	**Catullus 51 (Thomson)**
φαίνεταί μοι κῆνος ἴσος θέοισιν ἔμμεν' ὤνηρ, ὄττις ἐνάντιός τοι ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἆδυ φωνεί- σας ὑπακούει καὶ γελαίσας ἰμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν (5) καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν, ὠς γὰρ <ἔς> σ' ἴδω βρόχε' ὠς με φώνη- σ' οὐδὲν ἔτ' εἴκει, ἀλλὰ †κὰμ† μὲν γλῶσσα †ἔαγε†, λέπτον δ' αὔτικα χρῶι πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν, (10) ὀππάτεσσι δ' οὐδὲν ὄρημμ', ἐπιβρό- μβεισι δ' ἄκουαι, †ἐκὰδε† μ' ἴδρως κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτ_ ἔρα δὲ π _οίας ἔμμι, τεθ_ νάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδε_ ύης (15) φα _ίνομ' ἔμ' αὔται· ἀλλὰ πὰν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ †καὶ πένητα†	*Ille mi par esse deo videtur,* *ille, si fas est, superare divos,* *qui sedens adversus identidem te* *spectat et audit* *dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis* (5) *eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,* *Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi* *<vocis in ore>* *lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus* *flamma demanat, sonitu suopte* (10) *tintinant aures, gemina teguntur* *lumina nocte.* *Otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est:* *otio exsultas nimiumque gestis;* *otium et reges prius et beatas* (15) *perdidit urbes.*
Catullus 51 (English)	He seems to me to be equal to a god, that man, if it is lawful, seems to be above the gods, he who, sitting opposite of you, repeatedly looks and listens to you laughing sweetly, which snatches all sense from miserable me: for when I look upon you, Lesbia, nothing is left of my voice in my mouth but my tongue lies numb, a thin flame runs through my limbs, my ears ring with a sweet sound, and my eyes are covered with night. Leisure, Catullus, is a nuisance for you: you enjoy and spend too much time in leisure: leisure has destroyed earlier kings and blessed cities.[3]

[3] All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

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2. *Epistle* 1.19, 31-32

hunc [Alcaeus] *ego, non alio dictum prius ore Latinus*
uolgaui fidicen

I was the Latin lyricist to make Alcaeus known,
spoken before by no other mouth.

3. *Ode* 1.32, 3-4

age dic Latinum,
barbite, carmen

Come, my barbitos,
sing a Latin song

4. Alcaeus *fr.* 338 (Voigt)

Trans. D.A. Campbell

ὑέι μὲν ὁ Ζεῦς, ἐκ δ' οὐράνω
χείμων, πεπάγαισιν δ' ὑδάτων ῥόαι...
….
κάβαλλε τὸν χείμων', ἐπὶ μὲν τίθεις (5)
πῦρ, ἐν δὲ κέρναις οἶνον ἀφειδεως
μέλιχρον, αὐταρ ἀμφὶ κόρσα
μόλθακον ἀμφι<βάλων> γνόφαλλον

Zeus sends rain, a great storm comes from the heavens, running waters are frozen solid

Down with the storm! Stroke up the fire, mix the honeysweet wine unsparingly, and put a soft fillet round your brows

5. *Ode* 1.9, 1-8

vides ut alta stet nive candidum
Soracte, nec iam sustineant onus
silvae laborantes, geluque
flumina constiterint acuto

Do you see how Soracte stands there white with deep snow, and how the straining woods no longer sustain their burden, and how the rivers stand fixed by sharp ice?

dissolve frigus ligna super foco (5)
large reponens atque benignius
deprome quadrimum Sabina,
O Thaliarche, merum diota:

Melt away the cold by placing logs high above the fire and more generously bring forth the four-year old wine from the Sabine diota, O Thaliarchus

6. *Epistle* 19, 23 - 27

Parios ego primus iambos
ostendi Latio, numeros animosque secutus
Archilochi, non res et agentia verba Lycamben

I was the first to show the Parian iambus to Latium, following the meter and spirit of Archilochus, but not the subject or words that were aimed at Lycambes

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