

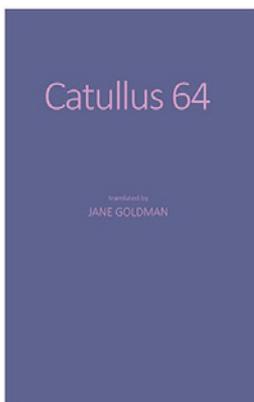
Book Review

Catullus 64

Goldman (J.) Pp. 64. Edinburgh: Main Point Books, 2023. £7.00. ISBN: 9780992723385.

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Preface to the review: Classical Reception

[There is no semantic significance in the presence or absence of quotation marks or upper or lower case around the word Reception/‘reception’.]

‘Reception’, born out of Reception Theory, is very much the thing these days in humanities subjects, dedicated interdisciplinary departments and institutes springing up all over the place. ‘Reception’ in the field of Classics is the ongoing process by which Classical Antiquity has influenced and been actively ‘received’

by later historical periods. ‘Actively received’ includes adaptations of classical material and new creations inspired by classical material. It is all about what is done with what has been ‘received’. ‘(The) Classical Tradition’ by contrast is a more passive thing, and is essentially what, and by what processes, and with what influences, Classical Antiquity, especially texts, has been transmitted to successive eras. Classical Reception is or sets out to be creative, innovative, and dynamic. Classical Tradition, if I may beg its pardon, is none of these, nor does it set out to be. It is rather more staid and scholarly, and as a record of the past is necessarily backward looking.

‘Staid’ is not a term that you can level at the item under review, and it is difficult to say whether the piece is an adaptation or a new inspired creation; it leans more to the latter, I would say.

The item is an example of what may be done under the name of ‘Reception’. Whether it should have been done in this case is another matter, and impossible to decide since creative/adaptive ‘reception’ is a free-for-all that is subject to no rules or guidance as to what is admissible in this category. Bentham called natural rights ‘nonsense on stilts’. One sometimes thinks it is a description that may be apt for some examples of creative and adaptive ‘reception’. (See the end of the review for more on Classical Reception and its possible drawbacks.)

The Review

I came across the piece under review thanks to John Godwin, retired Head of Classics at Shrewsbury School. He happens to have

reviewed the piece himself for *BMCR* (*BMCR* 2023.11.29). Would he, I wondered, have used the piece himself when teaching *Catullus 64* to his sixth-formers, perhaps as an adventurous example of reception (which it is: see the preview and later). His review is almost unqualifiedly favourable, warm even. Since I am not sure what to make of it, I reserve judgement. I waiver between my admiration of its brio and inventiveness and my frustration at its opacity.

What follows now are specimen excerpts from the piece, taken from Godwin’s review. The explicit language is to be found throughout the piece, so the excerpts are not untypical (we are not dealing here with the occasional word, as in Aristophanes). The frequency of use of such language and its intensity are intended presumably to convey how angry people, especially wronged women (and their supporters), openly express (and should express?) their anger today – the opposite of the typical epic heroine. (Another parallel explanation is suggested later.) There is a lot of anger in *Catullus*, it must be said, often gratuitous and deliberately offensive – but not in poem 64. *Catullus* was respectful of the conventions of genre in this instance, as it behoved him if he wanted his poem to be published. Here then are the excerpts with line numbers of the poem:

133 so you snatched me from daddy’s hearth devious
134 devious city boy to ditch me on this barren beach
135 so off you fuck flouting the bosses’ charter
136 callous fuck fuck off home you vile cheat
137 could nothing change your cruel mind’s
138 scheme did you have no mercy in you ...
172 fucking fuck never should
173 arseface ships have touched crack-city sands
174 nor flashing his grim gifts for the bully beast
175 should that tar ever have tied rope on crack-island ...

Strong stuff, and there are 409 lines of it. (Is it a coincidence that the piece has 64 pages?)

The days are gone, thankfully, when salacious and scatological language in Greek and Latin translations in English was either omitted altogether, with or without lacunae, or left untranslated, or translated into French (!). As for a lady perpetrating such filth ... Goldman’s *Ariadne* counterpart appears to have Tourette’s, and reminds me of Sinéad O’Connor cursing the Catholic Church, or a remix of the Beat Poet Allen Ginsberg’s poem *Howl*, or the voluble solitary female character (or rather just her mouth) in the playlet *Not I* by Samuel Beckett.

As for putting an end to the censorship of Classical texts, we have eminent Classicists themselves to thank, notably Kenneth Dover and James Adams. The latter’s book, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (nearly 40 years old now) in particular is still indispensable, especially for love (and hate) poetry, not least because it is the only one of its kind – it is difficult to imagine anyone else writing such a book. Dover’s contribution is much better known, of course, from the pioneering *Greek Homosexuality* and his autobiography *Marginal Comment* (now reissued with a substantial introduction and copious annotations).

The book, or rather booklet, that is the subject of this review is a loosely based version – one can hardly call it a translation – of

Catullus's poem 64. So loosely is it based on the poem that were it not for the title one could be forgiven for not realising that it has anything to do with Catullus.

Catullus was of course one of the authors who fell foul of the English censors. But not for anything in poem 64, which is a 'little epic' (*epyllion*). It is as innocent of obscenity as its Victorian translation by Leonard Smithers. So why introduce obscenity into it?

The contrast between Catullus' poem and Goldman's piece is stark; it is clearly deliberate. Is it in its way a mocking/sneering attack on ancient epic poetry and its hidebound conventions, not to mention epic's depiction of women and their impassive role? And peppering it with obscenities is just the sort of thing Catullus might have done too, albeit in a very different context. Mangling Catullus' poem might make some kind of sense in that case. Something like this is in fact suggested in the publisher's blurb, and so may have been in Goldman's mind. But the blurb makes Catullus himself, not just Goldman, a critic of what his poem represents, a crypto critic though, not an outspoken one. The blurb also states that the piece is a 'meticulous ... translation from the Latin'. It is anything but that, by any reasonable notion of 'translation'. The piece is not even close enough, in language or content, tone or attitude, to be seen as a parody.

There is no doubt that Goldman is aware that Catullus' poem belongs to the genre of epic, if only on a small scale. The proof of this is that she has deliberately omitted any trace of epic in her own piece: sans metre, sans gods, sans heroes, sans heroines, sans place names, sans everything. What one is left with are descriptions of nameless characters in nameless places that belong more to the present world than the world of epic.

So, Goldman's piece belongs to what is known as 'reception', and a striking piece it is. Presumably, since she has offered it for publication, she is inviting us, or at least expecting us, to make a critical assessment of it. But a worrying thing about 'reception' is that there seems to be little constraint on the imagination (many will see that as a good thing), so that you can create what you like with the material you have received, provided only that it can be seen to be in some way Classical in origin. A very broad canvas

then. A drawback to this licence is that there are no clear or accepted criteria by which to make a critical assessment of what is created. In fact there seems to be an attitude that criticism is out of place and hampers creative endeavour. There is a danger too that an imagined version of the past created by 'reception' will come to be confused with, or even preferred to, the real past of the historian, on whom there are rigorous constraints to do with sources and evidence. A more worrying thing is that of creating a past as you would like it to have been, in accordance with some ideology or agenda. We call this 'revisionism', the unacceptable face of revising our views about the past, which is what genuine historical enquiry obliges us to do, when warranted.

To conclude: if the reader wants to see the sort of thing that is being created these days from what has come down to us from Classical Antiquity, this short book will provide an example, though perhaps not a typical example. Who knows that such enterprises are not helping to keep Classics alive? But if your interest in it is to read a translation of a well-known work from Antiquity, better avoid this piece, I would say. Alternatively, and preferably, get a reputable translation of Catullus 64 and compare it with Goldman, asking yourself why you think that she chose to mangle the poem in order to make whatever point or points she thought might be conveyed thereby. There is no explanatory material, except for the blurb, that comes with the piece, which some may find frustrating, especially concerning the (presumed) identities of characters and places in the original, another reason to have the original to hand to guide you.

Finally, there are bound to be people, including Classicists (perhaps ones with an aversion to epic), who genuinely prefer Goldman to Catullus. That's OK, it's allowed by Reception. She has been inspired by a piece of creative writing in Classical Antiquity that has come down to us – only just in the case of Catullus – to create a new piece of her own, for which we should be thankful. A facile point on which to end: she would not have done so had it not been for Catullus 2,000 years ago. *Vivat Catullus*.

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