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Translation of Catullus 51 and Sappho 31

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Abstract: *Catullus 51, “Ille mi par,” is Catullus’ translation and adaptation of Sappho’s poem “φαίνεται μοι” (Sappho 31 by the Lobel and Voigt numbering). After translating Catullus 51 in a Latin Lyric class, I became very interested in comparing the two poems and investigating how Catullus used Sappho’s framework to express his own desire and longing for Lesbia. Here I submit a translation of Catullus 51 and one of Sappho 31, specifically intended to be read side by side. I have attempted to render a translation of each poem that will demonstrate both the areas in which Catullus nearly literally translates the Sappho, and the lines which are Catullus’ own invention. Of particular interest are the last four lines of Catullus’ poem, which end the poem on a restrained, dispassionate note that contrasts sharply with the strong emotion of the first three stanzas. The Sappho poem, by contrast, ends with a culmination of Sappho’s passion and a resolve for action. I present both poems for comparison, so that a reader may appreciate the depth of emotion in both poems, and the differing conclusion of each poem. I was particularly inspired and influenced by Anne Carson’s dynamic translation of Sappho 31, although mine differs significantly from hers. My translation of Catullus 51 diverges from most other translations I have read in that I have attempted a translation that is fairly poetically emotional.*

References and Lexical Acknowledgments:

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Catullus

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
 eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,
 Lesbia, adspexi, nihil est super mi
 vocis in ore

lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus
 flamma demanat, sonitu suo
 tintinant aures, gemina teguntur
 lumina nocte.

Otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est:
 otio exsultas nimiumque gestis:
 otium et reges prius et beatas
 perdidit urbes.

Sappho

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
 ἔμμεν' ὄνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι
 ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδου φωνεί-
 σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἡμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν
 καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν·
 ὡς γὰρ <ἔς> σ' ἴδω βρόχε' ὡς με φώνη-
 σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἴκει,

ἀλλὰ καμ μὲν γλῶσσα ἔαγε, λέπτον
 δ' αὐτίκα χρῶι πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμακεν,
 ὀπάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-
 μειςι δ' ἄκουαι,

ἑκαδέ μ' ἴδρωσ κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
 παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
 ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
 φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὐται.

ἀλλὰ τὰν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ καὶ πένητα

Catullus

he seems to me to be equal to the gods
he – if I may utter it – surpasses the gods,
he who sits facing you always
and sees and hears you

sweetly laughing, and this steals
all my senses from me and I am lost:
for as soon as I see you
Lesbia
no words remain in my mouth for me

but my tongue is paralyzed
and fine flames run through my body
and my ears ring with their own sound
and my eyes are doubly covered with shadows.

Leisure, Catullus, is not good for you:
Leisure you relish, and you act too
unrestrainedly:
leisure has destroyed past kings and happy
cities.

Sappho

to me he seems to be equal to the gods,
that man who sits near you, facing you
and hears you
speaking sweetly

laughing delightfully, and this actually
makes my heart tremble within my breast;
for whenever I look at you – even a glance! –
no words come to me,

but my tongue is snapped
and fine flames run through my body instantly
and I see nothing with my eyes
and my ears ring

and sweat pours down me,
and all of me is trembling,
and I am paler green than grass
and I seem to lack but little of dying.

but all should be risked! since even a poor
person –