

Bernadette Mayer's Catullan Experiments

Bernadette Mayer is an American experimental poet. Or is she? According to some, she was an experimental poet who then became a conventional one. Much of the relatively scanty scholarship on Mayer circles around issues of categorization, gender, and experimentation (Vickery 2001, White 2014). While her earlier work from the 60s and early 70s, together with classes she taught at the Poetry Project, would prove foundational to the radical anti-expressive poetics of the Language poets, she claimed to be rejected by this experimental group in the later 70s and 80s because of the more traditional style and content of her later works, especially those on motherhood. I argue that her books *Sonnets* (1989) and *The Formal Field of Kissing* (1990) transcend the dichotomy between expressive personal lyric and avant-garde experimentation, and that Catullus served as one of her most important models for the poetry of this period, culminating in *The Formal Field of Kissing*.

The Formal Field of Kissing continues much of the tone and themes of the more well-known *Sonnets*, such as their emphasis on love poetry (Baker 1996), but expands to include other types of material, such as a series of epigrams voiced by discarded children's toys. Even the title of the collection demonstrates Mayer's programmatic interest in formal tradition. The phrase "formal field of kissing" comes from her translation of Catullus 48, in which it renders *osculatio*, itself a highfalutin' neologism in the Latin. Mayer's translation renders Catullus' playful hint at sophisticated study of a frivolous matter and connects the term with the poem's agricultural metaphor, in which the speaker compares kissing to stalks of grain. In its use as the collection's title, the phrase calls attention to Mayer's interest in formal features such as meter and organization, especially for those readers who would be unfamiliar with its origin in Catullus.

The volume continues Mayer's experimentation with Catullan forms, mundane themes, and communal poetics. Many of the poems are fairly faithful and readable translations that reproduce the line numbers and even the syllabic counts of the originals. These are all visually juxtaposed with the Latin text facing on the left page, Loeb-style. Her choice of poems to translate tends towards the romantic (Catullus 48 and 99 on kissing Juventius) and the scabrous (invectives of Catullus 67 and 42). Other poems draw on the ancient authors in more elusive ways. For example, "After Catullus and Horace" responds to the Roman male love poets with the female speaker's contemporary experiences. Addressed to Sestius, the poem refers to having children and swears off "sleeping with you or any other man if you paid me." As often in her poems, Mayer concludes with a lively exhortation, this time to a less clearly defined interlocutor, possibly the reader or herself:

it's good to live without a refrigerator! why bother
to chill the handiwork of Ceres and of Demeter?
and of the lonesome Sappho. let's have it warm for now.

Instead of frigid and unsatisfying male poets, Mayer turns to ancient maternal goddesses, Roman Ceres and Greek Demeter, and Sappho, a female poetic predecessor juxtaposed with Catullus and Horace. Such play with traditional expectations of gender surely also lies behind her choice to translate Catullus' poems to Juventius instead of those to Lesbia. Mayer's open enthusiasm and rejection of heteronormative relationships permeate the rest of the book, in poems addressed to both male and female lovers. This expansive concept of love as communal plenty, instead of desiring lack, is a major continuation of the poems in *Sonnets* (Spahr 2001).

Finally, the authorship of the poems here pushes the traditional boundaries of a single-authored collection to the breaking point. Mayer makes this explicit on the acknowledgments page, titled *Gratia*. There, we learn that many of the poems, especially the translations, are collective efforts, written in conjunction with others such as Don Yorty and Mayer's sister Rosemary. In this sense as well, Catullus could be a predecessor for a group poetics, illustrated in his own use of translation and his many poems celebrating his collaborative friendship with other poets. While *The Formal Field of Kissing* at first appears to diverge from Mayer's earlier work, I show that these poems recuperate Catullus as an experimental model and transform translation into a spur for more radical poetics.

Bibliography

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