

Kisses Upon Sweet Kisses: Reading “I’ll Cover You” (*RENT*) as a Reception of Catullus 5

The year 2021 not only stands as the current mid-point in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, but also marks the 25th anniversary of Jonathan Larson’s *Rent*, the groundbreaking 1996 rock-musical set in New York City during another significant moment in the history of public health, the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This paper reads the duet “I’ll Cover You” and its reprise in *Rent* as a reception and reframing of Catullus 5, and examines how these two poetic works, composed more than 20 centuries apart, utilize nearly identical turns of phrase and compositional structures to convey parallel emotions of longing and love.

Larson’s *Rent* reworks and reframes both the plot and characters of Puccini’s 1896 opera, *La bohème*, a detail frequently acknowledged in non-academic writing and further examined in recent scholarship concerned with musical composition (Nisbet, 2011), dramaturgy and narrative systems (Pflüger, 2016), and the apparent juxtaposition between authenticity and the commodification of modern musical theater (Savran, 2002; Sebesta, 2006). Interviews with Larson (1996), the production team, and original cast (Weil, 1996; Milzoff, 2016) provide insight into the themes, impact, and meaning of the musical, emphasizing the importance of loving and living to the fullest both within the frame of the production and in the broader scope of life itself. While these themes partially echo notions already present in Puccini’s romantic opera, within the celebratory duet “I’ll Cover You” and its heart-rending reprise the work of a different Italian—that is, Roman—poet is recalled more directly, specifically in the themes and structures shared with the passionate appeal to Lesbia in Catullus 5. While this poem is widely beloved, and thus widely acknowledged and considered in scholarship, the most useful works for exploring the nature of its relationship to the text and composition of Larson’s “I’ll Cover You”

are those which provide a close reading and structural analysis of the Latin verse, such as commentaries and Segal's ever relevant 1968 study.

To a certain extent, the similarities between "I'll Cover You" and Catullus 5 are self-evident. Both open with words of living and loving—*vivamus ... atque amemus* (Catull. 5.1); "live in my house ... be my lover" (*Rent*, 1996)—both are directed towards a beloved and request a vast number of kisses, both make pointed statements about the brevity of life and the permanence of death, and both feature juxtapositions of time, money, and love. I make use of structural analyses such as Segal's not only to shed light on such similarities and to argue that Larson's song must be understood as a reception of Catullus' poem, but moreover to consider how these expressions continue to embody a specific set of emotions even when composed centuries apart. In response to this question, I propose that the language used by either creator taps into similar manners of imagining and giving voice to emotions and experiences that are otherwise felt to be indescribable.

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