

# CATULLUS: POEM 85

## Latin translations series

Christian authors in antiquity quite often employed the use of secular Greco-Roman writings for at least two purposes which I am aware of: (1) for the purpose of acquainting themselves with the classical literature of the day in order that it could be later used in apologetical debates. (2) By resourcing Greek and Latin literary documents, early Christian apologists were able to cut their teeth on 'classical canonical texts' as they prepared for their impending bible translation efforts. To these ends we too purpose to interact with ancient texts.

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## Odi et amo. Quare id faciam fortasse requiris? Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior

Catullus was a late Roman republic poet (c.87BC-57BC) who wrote riveting poetry, the kind which was expressive as well as symbolic. Saint Jerome gives us his approximate dates as he was familiar with them. Catullus' feelings along with his ideas drip from each line of verse attributed to him. The comments below are meant only to amplify the meanings embedded in the text below giving the reader some kind of concept of Catullus' thought.

This is a passionate piece and it has left its marks on the hearts of thousands. I envision Catullus, possibly, sitting at a desk with his face buried in his hands surrounded by mounting problems around him. There does seem to be one larger unseen predicament on the desk—in his heart and mind—before him. Often we have heard that poetry is that which is lost in translation, but it can also be said, as I have heard from my former language instructors, that a conveyance of meaning is dependent upon the interpreters ability to explain his or her text. Let us look closely at the poem to see if I am reading wide of the mark:

1. First of all, his usage of excrucior struck me hard. He ends the poem by telling us that he is deeply pained and anguished. I say pained because when we think of 'excruciating circumstances' a picture of intensity emerges. And our English word does carry derivative meaning.
2. The final word of the poem appears (to me) to be what instigated the first three words: 'odi et amo'. Words have a strange way of being a revealing form of self psychology. Should we assume that he is describing hatred as a trap in which he finds himself snared, yet despite its nagging presence he is able to love? Contextually, this would relate to one of his loves.

3. This disturbing moment of his (however it developed) leaves him deeply troubled. So, questioning himself as to how all this has come about he finds that he has no answer. Seemingly unaware of how he has become stuck in this mess, he is fully cognizant of its enveloping presence—oh, what thoughts of his friend Clodia fill his mind.
4. Is it possible that Catullus wrote this in such a way that the five syllables of the first three words were meant to be linked to the five syllables of the last two words? There is similarity in the soundings of each phoneme if accented right.

And so, in trying to understand our little poem we need some very definite semantic equivalents to bring Catullus' heart into the breast of the reader. He writes "Love and (yet) I hate. You are trying to come to a conclusion as to how I created this hard place (and) even I do not know but I do sense its presence (it is here and it is now) and I am in torment!"

From a grammatical perspective, at times, passives and past tenses may be translated as active verbs. In this context it is receiving a well deserved placement.

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