

CASA TRANSLATION PRIZE 2023

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Introduction

As an undergraduate at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, I wrote this translation of Catullus' *Carmen* 27 for amusement:

Latin

*Minister vetuli puer Falerni,
inger mi calices amariores,
ut lex Postumiae iubet magistrae
ebriosa acino ebriosioris.
At vos quo lubet hinc abite, lymphae, 5
vini perniciēs, et ad severos
migrate. Hic merus est Thyonianus.*

South African

Boetie!¹ My china² that brings us the old Castle draught,³
fill my swak⁴ mug,
as it is ordered by that chickie⁵ Postimae,
pissed⁶ as she is beyond belief.
But you, amanzi,⁷ corruptor of utshwala,⁸ voetsek⁹ to wherever you want,
go to the old toppies.¹⁰ Hier's dit net lekker!¹¹

Recently the nature of how my generation, and those following it, so easily mix and match languages (plurilingualism) has interested me. The rules of this contest say to translate a Latin or Greek text into *a* South African language. However, that is not how we speak. Even when we think that we are speaking 'purely' English or

¹ *Boetie*: little brother/boy.

² *My China*: my friend.

³ *Castle Draught*: name of South African beer.

⁴ *Swak*: bad, terrible.

⁵ *Chickie*: girl.

⁶ *Pissed*: drunk.

⁷ *Amanzi*: water.

⁸ *Utshwala*: traditional Zulu beer.

⁹ *Voetsek*: go away! (very rude).

¹⁰ *Old toppies*: old people.

¹¹ *Hier's dit net lekker*: this here is only sweet (good, great).

Afrikaans or Zulu or Xhosa, the barriers between the languages are so fluid, especially in South Africa. It is one of the things that make us so unique; that helps us do so well when we go overseas and interact with other, unfamiliar cultures. We are infinitely adaptable, and it is because we grow up hearing and speaking multilingually.

Those more easily workable in casual South African slang have been preferred when selecting poems. Likewise, those with locations that would make the poems anachronistic if translated into modern locations have been avoided as much as possible.

No attempt has been made to force the English into an ancient or a modern meter. While this is an issue of much contention in translating all poetry, the goal here is something fresh and new. Trying to force it into meter or rhyme will only stifle and petrify the already lyrical nature of our country's slang.¹²

Trigger Warnings

Catullus is a fascinating poet because he writes everything from gushy love poetry to violent, filthy threats. Very often in our schooling, we are carefully herded towards the Lesbia poems or others of a more modest nature, but I believe this is a mistake. All of us at the university level are consenting adults, and we have all been exposed to far worse than Catullus, I am sure. That said, Catullus does touch on topics of a triggering nature, and warnings are in order. Please be aware that the following sensitive topics occur in the following translations:

- Homophobic language
- Body shaming
- Alcohol
- Threats of violence
- Profanity
- References to prostitution
- References to mental illness

¹² All Latin texts are from Garrison 2005.

Carmen 5: All the kisses

*Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus
rumoresque senum severiorum
omnes unius aestimemus assis!
Soles occidere et redire possunt;
5 nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,
nox est perpetua una dormienda.
Da mi basia mille, deinde centum;
dein mille altera, dein secunda centum;
deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum.
10 Dein, cum milia multa fecerimus,
conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus,
aut ne quis malus invidere possit,
cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.*

YOLO¹³ and love, my Lesbia. Let's count the 411¹⁴ of those old toppies¹⁵ at just one cent¹⁶. The sun can go down and come back: but for us, when the short light is nixed¹⁷, there is only one long night to doss¹⁸ through. So give me a thousand kisses and then another hundred, then a thousand more and another second hundred, and another thousand, and then a nogga¹⁹ hundred. Then when we've made out with a thousand kisses, we'll make them all deurmekaar²⁰ so we don't know how many, so no skabenga²¹ can put bad muthi²² on us by knowing how much we kissed.

¹³ *YOLO*: You Only Live Once. Not specifically South African, but used especially before one is about to do something risky.

¹⁴ *411*: gossip. Kasi slang. Thomson 1997:219 suggests that in this case *rumores* refers more to grumbling or muttering but I feel that gossip also works. I question if Thomson would make this judgement if it were 'old women' instead of 'old men'.

¹⁵ *Toppies*: old men.

¹⁶ *Cent*: smallest unit of South African money. An *as* was the smallest coinage of the Roman world (Garrison 2005:97).

¹⁷ *Nix*: nothing, here to end something, turn something into nothing.

¹⁸ *Doss*: sleep; the eternal sleep that is death.

¹⁹ *Nogga*: another, once again.

²⁰ *Deurmekaar*: confused, mixed up.

²¹ *Skabenga*: a bad person, a criminal.

²² *Muthi*: traditional medicine. Green (2005:214) equates this line as an attempt to 'frustrate jealous attempts at hexing (*invidere*) Catullus and Lesbia by means of the evil eye'. Hence, I've chosen the South African concept of muthi, which while often used medicinally and for prosperity spells, can also be used by malign *sangoma* for curses.

Carmen 25: To Thallus, the Twink

*Cinaede Thalle, mollior cuniculi capillo
vel anseris medullula vel imula oricilla
vel pene languido senis situque araneoso,
idemque, Thalle, turbida rapacior procella,
cum diva Murcia arbitros ostendit oscitantes,
remitte pallium mihi meum, quod involasti,
sudariumque Saetabum catagraphosque Thynos,
inepte, quae palam soles habere tamquam avita.
Quae nunc tuis ab unguibus reglutina et remitte,
ne laneum latusculum manusque mollicellas
inusta turpiter tibi flagella conscribillent,
et insolenter aestues, velut minuta magno
depressa navis in mari, vesaniente vento.*

Thallus, you twink,²³ softer than the fur on a bunny, than the down²⁴ of a goose, than the bottom of an earlobe, or the limp dick of an ouballie²⁵ gathering spiders' webs.²⁶ Sho,²⁷ Thallus, you're making moves²⁸ like a storm when Lady Love²⁹ points out the yawning guests. Give me back my seanamarena³⁰ that you pounced on – and the hankie³¹ I got from Spain³². Also, the tablet³³ from Turkey³⁴ that you – you mamparra³⁵ – show off like it came from your amadlozi.³⁶ Now, laat gaan³⁷ from your sticky paws³⁸ and send them back. Or

²³ *Twink*: an effeminate gay youth. Twinks (in general) take on the 'bottom' role during sex which satisfies Garrison's definition (2005:108) of a *cinaede* as someone who 'takes the passive, submissive role in anal sex between men'.

²⁴ *Down*: Latin is literally marrow, but Thomson 1997:267 suggests the 'inner down feathers'.

²⁵ *Ouballie*: old man; literally 'old ball' so I used it as a play on male genitalia.

²⁶ *Spider's webs*: no one I know uses cobwebs anymore.

²⁷ *Sho*: an expression of surprise, disbelief or disapproval.

²⁸ *Making moves*: doing something criminal in nature or a seduction when referring to a love interest.

²⁹ *Lady Love*: lit. Murcia; an epitaph of Venus. Here I used a generic term to keep the meaning intact.

³⁰ *Seanamarena*: a popular and highly valued design of Basotho blanket, traditionally worn like a wrapped cloak.

³¹ *Hankie*: handkerchief.

³² *Spain*: lit. Saetabis, a town in Valencia, Spain, renowned in Roman times for its fine linen (Garrison 2005:102).

³³ *Tablet*: *Catagraphos* is a word that is difficult to define (Thomson 1997:267). It might be embroidery (Garrison 2005:108), drawing (Mulroy 2002:21) or a writing tablet (Thomson 1997:267). I have chosen to keep the word tablet to play on the modern affliction of having our digital tablets stolen while out at dinner.

³⁴ *Turkey*: lit. Bithynia (Garrison 2005:108).

³⁵ *Mamparra*: a fool, idiot.

³⁶ *Amadlozi*: ancestors.

³⁷ *Laat gaan*: let go, release.

³⁸ *Sticky paws*: lit. unstick it from your talons, but sticky paws fits as a colloquial description of thieves.

sjamboks³⁹ are gonna scrawl over your fluffy little sides and soft hands, burning skaamte.⁴⁰ And you'll squirm⁴¹ like a tiny boat surprised by the great ocean in a raging wind.

Carmen 40: What you scheming, Ravidus?

*Quaenam te mala mens, miselle Ravide,
agit praecipitem in meos iambos?
Quis deus tibi non bene advocatus
vecordem parat excitare rixam?
An ut pervenias in ora vulgi?
Quid vis? Qualubet esse notus optas?
Eris, quandoquidem meos amores
cum longa voluisti amare poena.*

Ag shame⁴² Ravidus, are you mal⁴³ to drive straight into my beats?⁴⁴ What god did you screw up⁴⁵ calling, and now they're gunning a pehrer?⁴⁶ Serious?⁴⁷ You wanna be in all the skinnerbeks⁴⁸ mouths? What are you scheming?⁴⁹ You wanna be famous no matter what? Sho,⁵⁰

³⁹ *Sjambok*: a tapered whip of hippo or rhino hide; traditionally used for herding cattle but abused in the hands of the Apartheid police for (often lethal) corporate punishment and torture. It leaves terrible scars when used this way.

⁴⁰ *Skaamte*: shame, shamefully; shameful because whipping is the punishment for a slave (Thomson 1997:268). It can also be a euphemism on a more sexual nature, which works here considering the double entendre that follows it.

⁴¹ *Squirm*: there is an element of sexual innuendo here in that Thallus usually 'boils' in a lustful way, but now he'll do so because of the heat of the whip (Thomson 1997:268).

⁴² *Ah Shame*: a phrase that usually indicates pity but is also used ironically.

⁴³ *Mal*: crazy, insane. The Latin is literally an evil mind.

⁴⁴ *Beats*: lyrics of a song. The Latin is literally iambics, a meter of Latin poetry. I enjoy the play on the word 'beat' here as both the poet's vicious words and also in the sense of 'beat up', to assault someone.

⁴⁵ *Screw up*: to mess something up, to make a mistake, to do something incorrectly

⁴⁶ *Gunning a pehrer*: looking for a fight. Mostly used within the KZN Indian community (cf. Mzansi Taal, n.d.).

⁴⁷ *Serious*: Garrison (2005:166) notes that the *ut* in this context implies an incredulous question. The normal adverb of 'seriously' is shortened here for colloquial impact.

⁴⁸ *Skinnerbek*: someone who gossips especially without paying attention to the facts. The Latin is 'in vulgar mouths' i.e. being talked about by the common people.

⁴⁹ *Scheming*: to deliberate, plan, plot

⁵⁰ *Sho*: see n.30.

you will be! Since you want to love my
kêrel,⁵¹ the punishment is gonna be long.

Carmen 41: Worn-out Sugar Baby

*Ameana puella defututa
tota milia me decem poposcit
ista turpiculo puella naso,
decoctoris amica Formiani.
Propinqui, quibus est puella curae,
amicos medicosque convocate:
non est sana puella, nec rogare
qualis sit solet aes imagosum.*

Ameana, the fucked-up skank⁵², asked
me for a whole ten grand. That one with
the kinda ugly nose and the stukk⁵³ of
that bankrupt dude⁵⁴ from Formia.⁵⁵
Yo,⁵⁶ family, you lot looking after this
chickie,⁵⁷ you better call her chommie⁵⁸
and the medunsas:⁵⁹ the girl is nyela.⁶⁰
She never bothers to check herself out⁶¹
in the mirror to see what sort of look⁶²
she got.

⁵¹ *Kêrel*: a boyfriend (sometimes also a policeman). There is no way to tell in the Latin if *amores* is a man or a woman but Thomson (1997:308) points out that Catullus only uses this phrase in poems about his boyfriend, Juventius, and never in poems about Lesbia.

⁵² *Skank*: a woman who has a reputation for being overly sexually active, derogatory.

⁵³ *Stukk*: lit. a piece, a female love interest.

⁵⁴ *Dude*: a man.

⁵⁵ *Formia*: a town in Italy along the east coast (Thomson 1997:311).

⁵⁶ *Yo*: usually a greeting, but can also be used to indicate a vocative or draw someone's attention.

⁵⁷ *Chickie*: see n.5.

⁵⁸ *Chommies*: friends.

⁵⁹ *Medunsa*: the former name of Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University, *i.e.*, a doctor.

⁶⁰ *Nyela*: mentally ill.

⁶¹ *Check herself out*: to look in a mirror and make sure your appearance is good, also in a sexual way to check someone else out is to initially assess them as a potential partner.

⁶² *Look*: her image, brand, external appearance. The Latin uses *aes imagosum*, an image in bronze, thus a mirror. However the attack here is that Ameana charges a fortune when her appearance does not, in Catullus' view, warrant her charging that much (Green 2005:225).

Carmen 112: Naso, the Chad

*Multus homo es, Naso, neque tecum multus
homo est quin
te scindat: Naso, multus es et pathicus.*

You're such a chad,⁶³ Naso, but not
many other guys wanna jol⁶⁴ with you.
You're a chad, Naso, but you're also a
muscle Mary.⁶⁵

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⁶³ *Chad*: an alpha male, a tough, successful, good-looking man. Garrison (2005:166) discusses the two potential meanings of *multus homo*: that of a manly man or many men, preferring the former.

⁶⁴ *Jol*: to party. *Scindat* commonly means to tear or rip, but it can also mean to 'tear off one's travelling cloak i.e. to urge, press, solicit one to stay' (Lewis and Short 1879). In other editions *scindat* is replaced with *discumbus* 'to lay beside one at dinner' (Thomson 1997:549) or *descendit* 'to lay down' (Green 2005:206). The implication here is that no other men are encouraging him to stay or lay down with them, presumably in the context of a sexual innuendo.

⁶⁵ *Muscle Mary*: a gay man obsessed with a gym body. Green 2005:268 defines *pathicus* as a 'passive homosexual' and comments that Naso is clearly hiding his 'instincts behind a show of ultramascularity'. Mulroy 2002:103 uses queer as a translation for *pathicus*, but its meaning has changed in recent years to a broader sense of not-heterosexual or non-binary, cf. genderqueer. I decided on muscle Mary to contrast how Naso is externally presenting himself in a hyper masculine (and presumably heterosexual manner) but is homosexual.