Primary Source: Catullus, selections.¹

The Scholars, W. B. Yeats

Bald heads forgetful of their sins,
Old, learned, respectable bald heads
Edit and annotate the lines
That young men, tossing on their beds,
Rhymed out in love’s despair
To flatter beauty’s ignorant ear.
All shuffle there; all cough in ink;
All wear the carpet with their shoes;
All think what other people think;
All know the man their neighbour knows.
Lord, what would they say
Did their Catullus walk that way?

Cicero (106 BCE-43 BCE, Pro Caelio, 56 BCE)
Caesar (100 BCE-44 BCE)
Catullus (84 BCE-54 BCE)
Virgil (70 BCE-19 BCE)
Horace (65 BCE-8 BCE)
Tibullus (55/50 BCE-19 BCE)
Propertius (49/47 BCE-16 BCE)
Ovid (43 BCE-17 BCE)

a) Catullus 2

Sparrow, my girl’s darling,
Whom she plays with, whom she cuddles,
Whom she likes to tempt with finger-
Tip and teases to nip harder
When my own bright-eyed desire
Fancies some endearing fun
And a small solace for her pain,
I suppose, so heavy passion then rests:
Would I could play with you as she does
And lighten the spirit’s gloomy cares!

b) Catullus 3

Grieve, O Venuses and Loves
And all the lovelier people there are:
My girl’s sparrow is dead,

Sparrow, my girl's darling,
Whom she loved more than her eyes.
For honey-sweet he was and knew his
Mistress well as a girl her mother,
Nor would he ever leave her lap
But hopping around, this way, that way,
Kept cheeping to his lady alone.
And how he's off on the dark journey
From which they say no one returns.
Shame on you, shameful dark of Orcus,
For gobbling up all the pretty things!
You've robbed me of so pretty a sparrow!
Your fault it is that now my girl's
Eyelids are swollen red with crying.

c) Catullus 5

We should live, my Lesbia, and love
And value all the talk of stricter
Old men at a single penny.
Suns can set and rise again;
For us, once our brief light has set,
There's one unending night for sleeping.
Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred,
Then another thousand, then a second hundred;
Then, when we've made many thousands,
We'll muddle them so as not to know
Or lest some villain overlook us
Knowing the total of our kisses.

d) Catullus 7

You ask how many of your mega-kisses
Would more than satisfy me, Lesbia.
Great as the sum of Libyssan sand lying
In silphiophorous Cyrene
From the oracle of torrid Jove
To Battus' Holy Sepulchre,
Or many as the stars, when night is silent,
That watch the stolen loves of humans—
To kiss you just so many kisses
Would more than satisfy mad Catullus;
The inquisitive couldn't count them all
Nor evil tongue bring them bad luck.

e) Catullus 6

Were she not unsmart and unwitty,
Flavius, you'd want to tell Catullus
About your pet and couldn't keep quiet.
In fact you love some fever-ridden Tart and you’re ashamed to own it. That you’re not spending deprived nights Silent in vain the bedroom shouts Perfumed with flowers and Syrian oils, The pillow equally this side and that Dented, and the rickety bed’s Yackety perambulation. It’s no good keeping quiet about it. You’d not present such fucked-out flanks If you weren’t up to something foolish. So tell us what you’ve got, for good Or ill. I wish to emparadise You and your love in witty verse.

f) I’ll bugger (pedicabo) you and stuff your gobs (irrumabo), Aurelius Kink (pathice) and Poofter (cinaede) Furius, For thinking me, because my verses Are rather sissy, not quite decent. For the true (pius) poet should be chaste (castum) Himself, his verses need not be. Indeed they’ve salt and charm then only When rather sissy and not quite decent And when they can excite an itch I don’t say in boys but in those hairy Victims of lumbar sclerosis. Because you’ve read of my X thousand Kisses you doubt my virility? I’ll bugger you (pedicabo) you and stuff your gobs (irrumabo).

g) Catullus 21

Aurelius, father of the hungers, Not just of these but of all that were Ere this or will be in other years, You long to bugger (pedicare) my love, and not In secret. You’re with him, sharing jokes, Close at his side, trying everything. It’s no good. If you plot against me I’ll get in first and stuff your gob (irruratione). I’d keep quiet if you did it well fed; But it annoys me that the boy Will learn from you to hunger and thirst. So stop it while you decently may, In case you make your end—gob-stuffed.

h) Catullus 41

Ameana, the female fuck-up, Has asked me for a cool ten thousand,
That girl with the unattractive nose,
Friend of the bankrupt from Formiae.²
Kinsfolk responsible for her,
Call friends and doctors to advise.
The girl's not well and will not ask
For brass reflecting her true self.

i) Catullus 43

Greetings, girl with no mini nose
Nor pretty foot nor dark eyes
Nor long fingers nor dry mouth
Nor altogether felicitous tongue,
Friend of the bankrupt from Formiae.
And does the Province call you pretty?
Compare our Lesbia to you?
O what tasteless boorish times!

j) Catullus 57

They're a fine match, the shameless sods (improbis cinaedis),
Those poofters (pathico) Caesar and Mamurra.
No wonder. Equivalent black marks,
One urban, the other Formian,
Are stamped indelibly on each.
Diseased alike, both didymous,
Two sciolists on one wee couch,
Peers in adultery and greed,
Rival mates among the nymphets,
They're a fine match, the shameless sods (improbis cinaedis).

k) Catullus 58

Caelius, our Lesbia, the Lesbia,
The Lesbia whom alone Catullus
Loved more than self and all his kin,
At crossroads now and in back alleys
Peels great-hearted Remus' grandsons.

"The discourses of male desire in Latin love poetry...demonstrate that love (amor) is intimately bound
up with the hierarchies and social inequalities in the power systems of Roman politics. Amatory discourse in Roman love poetry cannot, I believe, be dissociated from male assumptions about desire
which reflect the hegemonic discourses of a patriarchal value system. As Michel Foucault has shown in The History of Sexuality, Greco-Roman erotic relations affirmed and consolidated social and political hierarchies. In the Greco-Roman model, true masculinity was attained only after an adolescent boy
passed through the stage of passivity and feminization (i.e. objectification), His masculinity in adulthood depended on control over his domus (household), over political and economic affairs, and,

² Mamurra, Caesar's chief engineer.
most importantly, over himself. Maintaining that control so important to Roman "masculinity" meant constant attention to any deterioration in social status, to the mastery of one's appetites, and to moral fortitude. Indeed, any loss of vitality resulting from sickness, old age, or overindulgence in physical pleasure, any lapse of moral resolve were threats to the preservation of masculine identity. Ancient masculinity is thus always at risk, but never so much as in the presence of the sexually wanton female, whose erotic impulses are imagined to be inexhaustible. The instability of Roman "masculinity" is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the amatory texts of Roman poets. Catullus' Lesbia poems show a constant tension between the male lover's assertion of his moral resolve and his reversion to "womanish" state in which he lapses into powerlessness and emotionality. The diminution of the Catullan lover's "maleness" when confronted by a woman he regards and depicts as sexually wanton, as we will see, allows Catullus to reveal the fragmenting effects of amor on the self.

Whereas the Catullan lover appears to struggle against his own "feminization," the Roman elegiac poets—particularly Propertius and Ovid—proclaim in their poems a radically unconventional philosophy of life through their apparently deliberate inversion of conventional sex roles—in which women are portrayed as dominant and men as subversive (Greece xii-xiii)...Ovid goes much further than Propertius in suggesting that the identification of the elegiac mistress as materia implies an inherent dehumanization and exploitation of women. By portraying the elegiac lover flagrantly using his mistress as his poetic materia for the sake of his personal and professional profit, Ovid deconstructs the romantic rhetoric of this poetic predecessors and reveals what he believes to be the hypocrisy in the elegiac pose" (Greene xv).