

Roz Kaveney is a poet, critic and novelist resident in London. Her novel *Tiny Pieces of Skull* won the Lambda in 2016; her recent publications include the novel *Revelations* and a poetic memoir *The Great Good Time*. In 2018 she published original versions of the complete poems of the Roman poet Catullus with Sad Press.

This interview with Henry Stead took place (in writing) in Spring 2023.

<https://www5.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2023/kaveney>

Henry Stead: Roz, thank you for agreeing to this interview. I have really enjoyed getting to know your versions of Catullus. They are remarkably true poems. In them I feel the presence of a consistent and consistently open Catullan persona, who seems also energised by your own personal experience. The way you translate his ancient poetry to contemporary idioms brings sometimes new and unfamiliar shades of interest to well-known poems, but it also drags into the spotlight poems that can easily be overlooked. Can I begin by asking you to say a bit about your relationship with Catullus? How compatible are (or were) your voices? It strikes me that you both occupy interesting spaces within your worlds, by which I mean Catullus appears to have lived a public and written life. This reminds me of your work as an activist and campaigner for trans rights, among other things. Was there some recognition, in this sense, when you were working on his poems?

Roz Kaveney: Yes, but the real point of contact was my sense of a younger self at Oxford and later as a working class adventurer using charm and talent to move in circles where I didn't particularly belong. I identified with Catullus as a kid from the provinces....

HS: That's really interesting. What aspects of his provinciality could you identify with?

RK: I lived in London until I was 13, at which point my father's promotion in the Prison Service uprooted us to Yorkshire. More crucially, it put me in a school that was academically very good but where I was put in a class with kids a year older than me because of exam scheduling and was horrendously bullied as a result. This meant I saw the loss of London as an exile and saw Oxford and then London as my path to the good life - reading [Margaret] Drabble's *Jerusalem the Golden* crystallised this feeling.

So... my head canon version of Catullus is a kid from Verona who finds himself in Rome without being especially rich, spending time with people his own age, some of whom have a lot more money or are from older Roman families. And the on and off lover of – assuming Lesbia is Clodia – an older woman with far higher standing.

My survival at my Leeds [Grammar] School taught me to be charming and smile a lot and this served me well at Oxford. I see the poems as Catullus' social calling card – the fine turned wit and bawdy gave him entrée. It was appropriate to post them on social media....

HS: Would you say your experience of the canon and Greek and Roman 'classics' (at school and then Oxford) in general were coloured by conventional associations of the material with social class? If so, how? Or was it more the social setting that made you feel like an outsider? (or both?)

RK: I was brought up Catholic in the era of the Latin Mass being standard, so Latin had a very different meaning to start off with. Plus, in the 60s, Latin was effectively compulsory for English and other Humanities courses at Oxford.... Thus Latin had a very different and specific set of meanings for an ambitious upper-working-going-on-lower-middle class kid.

It was one of the keys to upward mobility.

HS: In your Afterword you say you'll miss the 'bitchy sentimental brilliant twerp'. Do you still miss your time with Catullus?

RK: I always miss characters when I am done with them – I was writing a long sequential novel at the same time as these versions and five or six of my characters got over 15 years to be very real to me. Catullus became real in exactly the same way. There’s a sense in which these versions are another novel – I tried to understand the poems through the person in my head who wrote them.

HS: Does this mean that your versions were written by a fictionalised Catullus of your making? It makes a lot of sense, but also feels quite different to the approach of a more traditional kind of translator. Do you think Catullus the poet was doing something similar?

RK: I honestly don’t know how much the Catullus of the poems is a mask. I do know that I thought of that voice as a persona like the main characters of my novels – assembled from real bits of myself but not like me. Almost everything that happens to Annabelle in *Tiny Pieces of Skull* happened to me, but she is a more innocent protagonist and a far nicer and more secure person. I spent large parts of my mid teens and early twenties trying to present an acceptable male façade and my Catullus voice is a memory of that...

HS: How big a part did rhyme play in your translation?

RK: Rhyme is crucial to almost all of my poetry and particularly here because it’s so closely tied in English prosody to wit. In particular, I used the Shakespearian sonnet because so many of the shorter *Carmina* have an internal turn parallel to the volta of sonnets. Obviously there are some poems here that work differently – my version of the Attis poem in particular and the wedding hymns.

HS: What about Latin? You mention ‘an imperfect command’. Were you taught at school? And if so, how did this prepare you for your work as a translator of Roman poetry?

RK: I did Latin A-level and was well taught and had to do a Virgil paper for Oxford English prelims: thereafter I mostly let my Latin slide until I started working on these. My working method was that I would struggle through the Latin by itself, then go through with a literal crib, then read translations into my other languages – French and German, and then start work on my own poem.

HS: You acknowledge some assistance from Tony Keen and Nick Lowe. What did this collaboration look like?

RK: If I really didn’t understand what was going on grammatically and couldn’t find a relevant article online, I’d ring Nick or Tony up and get them to explain.

HS: In your Afterword, you thank John Crowley and Greg Feeley for their ‘running commentary... in social media’ – Can you explain how social media played a part in your creative process?

RK: I post all my poems online so as to have a sense of a dialogue with audience, and these in particular. John is a writer I particularly admire and Greg a critic... I just found their praise a way of ensuring I wasn’t wasting my time. At one point, after a political disagreement with Mary Beard, whom I know socially from *TLS* [*Times Literary Supplement*] parties, over no-platforming, I sent her my version of Attis [poem 63] as a peace offering and her praise confirmed to me that I was not making an idiot of myself.

HS: A few of your Catullan translations have been reproduced in Frank Wynne’s anthology *Queer* (2021), in which Catullus is presented as an LGBTQ writer. How do you feel about that?

RK: Well, we cannot be sure of anything across two millennia, and my whole Catullan project partly came out of an argument with Tom Holland about Foucault – though also out of an online argument with the ultramontane Catholic US fascist John C. Wright about Sappho.

HS: Can you elaborate on this? What were you arguing about? You have mentioned John C. Wright in your blog [<https://rozk.livejournal.com/273520.html>], but what were you and Tom Holland arguing about?

RK: John C. Wright wrote a post arguing that no one gay could produce work of real talent and that Sappho was probably a straight man – I responded with my first Sappho versions, the unrhymed ones....

I got into an argument with Tom simply because – I think as a perverse tease – he was pushing the Kenneth Dover/Foucault dominance/penetration model as if it were universally true and I was arguing that almost every hegemonic ideology has an opposition bubbling away next to it. I'd read *The Greeks and Greek Love* and he had not, but I wasn't going to pursue the point about the Hellenic world because I have lost what Greek I ever had.

HS: In Wynne's introduction to the anthology he asks but does not answer the question: 'Did Catullus think of himself as queer?' What do you think?

RK: He didn't have the language...but sometimes he's terribly laddish in the way he links sex, money and class as if they're all a huge joke and at other times he very clearly identifies with deserted women. And of course Attis. If we could talk to him and explain two thousand years of discourse while keeping his attention....

I'd call Cicero in evidence, who did not know quite what to make of young Catullus, but whatever it was, he was against it.

HS: It's such a realistic complexity, isn't it? The Catullan persona is no unidimensional character. How important (or not) is the translator's identity in the act of translation?

RK: One of the reasons why I describe these as versions is that I didn't want to be tied to the duty of literal accuracy: as I sometimes explain, I had a very interesting discussion of this with Craig Raine at Christopher Logue's funeral, defending Logue's Homer. (Craig is the partner of Anne Pasternak Slater, an apostle of strict accuracy.) In the case of poem 16, I wanted to be as shocking as the original but also to write a poem that felt personal to me as an elderly trans woman with a chequered sexual past.

HS: You seem comfortable with the graphic portrayal of the human body and sexual violence (not only in your translations, but also your original poetry). As you know, this is also a Catullan trait. There seems a relish in its delivery. What's going on here?

RK: There's a clash in my work between neo-classical formalism and my radical libertine values. It's all about honesty – my body has often failed me in grotesque ways and has also been the source of intense sexual pleasure. And yes, part of what drew me to Catullus was that sense of radical honesty and dislike of decorum. When his feelings are hurt, he will go all the way and I love that about him.

HS: You seem happy (happier than some translators) to swerve away from the Latin to make more concrete modern images, e.g. in poem 50 your Catullus and Licinius seem to be up late chatting online: keyboards instead of wax tablets. This kind of switch creates a contemporary and realistic scenario, a bridge between antiquity and modernity (in the finer details). It has a strong effect. Was this a conscious and consistent decision to 'up-date' or modernise?

RK: The poems happened in various batches over a period of time, and generally the ones you're talking of were early in the project. The longer poems apart from Attis and the epigrams and wedding hymns followed a few years later after Jo [Walton] at Sad Press had committed to the project. I did less modernising as I went but for no particular reason.

HS: You don't give the reader an introduction and there's only the briefest of afterwords. What are we to make of this?

RK: I felt the poems should do the talking.

HS: Are there any versions of Catullus that you especially like, or that were useful to you in getting to know the poems?

RK: I found an online site with literal versions in various languages which, as I mention above, is what I used for sense. I stayed away from other poetic versions so as to keep my palate fresh.

HS: Did you consider ordering the poems in any other way than from 1-116, given by the now standard editions? Do you have any theories about the order that the poems come in? Do you detect Catullan artifice in the placement, or does it feel random?

RK: I wasn't tempted to reorder them – the canonical order is pretty random and I have no particular sense of why that might be – but equally I didn't feel like changing it because any choices I might make would impose a view that would probably imply a process and impose a sentimental view of an emotional journey.

HS: What was the experience of working with Sad Press on the collection?

RK: We got talking in the bar at a science fiction convention and Jo mentioned he was publishing Adam Roberts' *Virgil*. I told him about my Catullus and emailed him the existing state of the ms then and there; he looked at it and commissioned me more or less on the spot. It was the easiest of negotiations. I then went away and slogged my way through the rest of the poems over a period of about three months – you can see it happen online in my 2018 Facebook pages between April and August.

HS: Catullus can be really funny and abrasive (sometimes at the same time). Did you find this difficult to handle? There is a lot of talk now (on all sides of the culture wars) about content warnings and ideas surrounding causing offence, especially but not exclusively in an educational context. What might Catullus bring to this debate? Should readers be protected from the poems of Catullus?

RK: I don't have a problem with content warnings and actually regard them as freeing – I used them with quite a lot of the poems as social media posts, as I had with e.g. some of my fan fiction and occasional posts about health. It's a politeness issue that means people establish a contract about what they're about to read or not.

HS: Has your stance to censorship changed over time? When political conservatives occupy the impulse to be free, what happens to the leftist anti-censorship tradition?

RK: The right wing wants absolute freedom for its own hate speech while suppressing everything else. Like a lot of people on the left I've moved from an absolutist free speech position to a more nuanced one. Speech can only be free if all voices have equal access and part of the point of hate speech is to tell the hearers that some voices need not be listened to. It's a culture war and wartime measures are being applied – the current editorial team at the *Guardian* have excluded me and other pro-trans voices over the last six years. I'm not happy about the situation but there it is – whenever possible I'd rather argue on equal terms than stand outside shouting.

HS: Over the past decade there has been a dramatic increase in the number of people identifying as non-straight in the UK. In the past, the ambivalent sexual orientation of the Catullan persona has been obscured, or erased, usually by a squeamish elite. Ours is, clearly, a very different world. Secularism has played its part. But so have changing attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Do you feel like the

2010s and 20s can access a deeper connection with Catullus than previously? Or are we simply continuing to read ourselves in the past?

RK: In a sense I'm the wrong person to ask because I've been involved since 1971 on and off in queer liberationist struggles and life – GLF/Gay Action in London, Oxford and Leeds; working bar at the RVT; transitioning; survival hustling in Chicago; hosting a trans commune in Dalston; doing propaganda for Sexual Fringe during the LLGC sex wars; Feminists Against Censorship; Liberty; work on legislation etc etc.

My life is too bound up with commitment for me to be objective. But I was certainly going to read Catullus in a very queer positive way.

HS: OK. But your experience is what I thought made you the *right* person to ask. Speaking about commitment, how would you describe Catullus' political and/or social engagement? You perhaps touch on one element of this in your idea about his 'radical honesty' but it'd be nice to hear more about that and if it intersects with more overt political action....

RK: An interesting point, isn't it? Given that there's at least a possibility that he was killed by Caesar's people for his disobliging remarks about Caesar and Mumurra. I don't think he had anything we'd recognize as an analysis but that he just disliked corruption and bullying. We know he was around for Mumurra's sumptuary trial and we don't have anything much else that can be dated. My head canon is that the reason he seems to stop and thereafter isn't talked about much is that he either got knocked on the head or went back to a quiet life in Verona in disgust....

HS: Your Catullus translation makes a claim for a less rigid model of same-sex desire in ancient Rome and in so doing increases visibility and acceptance of queerness in the present day. How far are you convinced by your findings in Catullus that there were voices in antiquity that countered the hegemony of the 'penetration paradigm' espoused by the majority of classical texts, and scholarship like Foucault and Dover?

RK: Class is important here – he's an arriviste having a relationship with an older married woman who is probably identifiable with one of the poshest women in Rome. He's the class inferior of her other lovers and sometimes feels like the girl in the relationship; his masculinity is threatened and insecure and angry. He's also part of a set of young men many of whom are openly having sex with each other and also with women slightly socially inferior; he is involved with Juventius who has more money than he does. The penetration paradigm gets broken down by e.g. the Gellius poem, where the fellator is seen as active predator. It seems to me that he's not operating in a world of simple binaries. And then there's Attis – he is trying to make an imaginative leap to understand what it would be like to just run away from the whole game and finding it scary – take Attis and not me.

And Ariadne's lament rings so true that it gets echoed in music a millennium and three quarters later.

HS: What was the hardest side of Catullus to access for you?

RK: He makes social embarrassment jokes about slavery.

HS: You're thinking of poem 10, where he shows off to a woman by pretending that he owns slaves really owned by his friend Cinna? I agree, it's a fascinating poem. When you read it, you relate with the bitter embarrassment of being caught in a lie, and then this innocuous emotion propels you directly into a slave society. Thank you so much for your time, Roz. It's been an honour and an education.