Articles

Pium Vestrum Catullum Britannum: The Influence of Catullus´ Poetry on John Skelton

Juan Manuel Castro Carracedo
Universidad de Salamanca

Abstract

John Skelton is the first English poet to show an unquestionable influence of the rediscovered Catullus. Despite the lack of direct quotations and the scarce reference to Catullus in Skelton's work, his identification with the Latin writer in a very significant moment of *The Garlande of Laurell* and the amount of parallels between them encourage us to study their relationship. This paper examines the effects of Skelton's reading of Catullan poetry going further than the thematic imitation in *Phyllyp Sparowe* already noticed by the critics: shared images, common motifs, and especially, similar attitudes towards some literary issues. It also analyses Skelton's reception of the Renaissance "Catullan myth" and how he tried to assume it in order to be considered an analogous figure in his own time.

In the closing part of *The Garlande of Laurell*, the poem which represents the climax and practically the conclusion of John Skelton's work, we read the following verses: "Ite, Britannorum lux O radiosa, Britannum / Carmina nostra pium vestrum celebrate Catullum!" (ll. 1521-2),[1] translated as "Go, shining light of the Britons, and celebrate our songs, your worthy British Catullus". The addressee of these words is Skelton himself and they strike us because they are nearly the only identification of Skelton with a classical poet throughout his work. There is only another one, in the same poem, with Homer, and this one alludes to a praise Erasmus dedicated to him in

---

[1] All quotations from Skelton's poetry are taken from Scattergood (1983). Catullus references and translations are from Goold's edition (1983).

one of his odes, where he defined Skelton as "England's Homer"[2] so, it seems, in some way, justified. However, as far as I know, there is no previous reference relating the figures of Skelton and Catullus, so we must supposse that this identification was Skelton's own.

This reference arouses several questions since, apparently, Skelton uses more frequently commonplaces from other classical poets (such as Horace or Juvenal) rather than Catullus. Besides, every time he displays a list of the poets he admires,[3] Catullus is not included. Paradoxically, when he evaluates his literary career (which is the aim of *The Garlande of Laurell*) Skelton proclaims himself the "British Catullus". I consider it valuable to study why Skelton appropriates Catullus in these lines, and for this we must study the Latin poet's influence on Skelton's work. This is worth doing not only because it will show us what Skelton's vision of the Latin poet was, but also, through Skelton's identification, we will obtain a vision of the writer himself (we could say 'another vision' because one of the favorite themes in Skelton's poetry is, as we know, John Skelton).

Despite the attempts to find vestiges of Catullan poetry in Chaucer (McPeek 1931) or in later medieval poets (Harrington 1963), it seems that the first English writer who shows some influence from Catullus is Skelton. It may give the impression that Catullus' arrival in England is rather late compared to other classical poets, but the history of the *Liber Catullianus* in the Middle Ages was very complex and no definite edition was issued before 1472.[4] Moreover, the introduction of Catullus in England could also be belated due to the divergency between the impetuous tone of his poems and the moderate character of the English people. As Berdan noticed in his *Early Tudor* Poetry, "the fire and passion of Catullus found a congenial soil in Italy while the cold, restrained, northern nature [of England] felt more at ease with the philosophy of Horace. [...] In Tudor England, humanism was a serious, moral, reflective force" (Berdan 1920:209).[5]

---

[2] The admiration the Dutch writer felt for Skelton is well-known; not only he compared the Englishman with Homer or Virgil, but also ascribed to him the restoration of literature in his country to the level of the Classics:

   For he from Latium all the muses led
   And taught them to speak English words instead
   Of Latin; and with Skelton England tries
   With Roman poets to contend the prize. (Trans. by Smith 1923:62)

[3] There is one example in *Phyllip Sparowe*, ll. 749-812 and another in *The Garlande of Laurell*, ll. 323-92.

[4] For a detailed account of the history of Catullus' first editions, see Gaisser (1993:24-65).

[5] Catullus' (and consequently Skelton's) ill-fame in England would peak a century later during

Many textual incertitudes prevent us from knowing when or how Skelton came into contact with Catullus. It is obvious that he read him in Latin: the only translation of Catullus before 1641, according to Palmer's *List of English Editions and Translations of Greek and Latin Classics,* consists only of a single edition of the *Phasellus ille*, dated in 1579. We can also infer, without fear of mistake, that Skelton read him from a manuscript copy (since the first printed editions of Catullus, from the 1470s, 1480s and 1490s were mere anthologies of his poetry, thus insufficient to explain Skelton's knowledge). Nevertheless, it is impossible to specify the text or conditions regarding Skelton's reading of Catullus.

We can assert that Skelton knew Catullus at a rather early date: there are no traces of him in his very first writings, but some of the lyrics from around 1495 include motifs which indicate Catullus' presence. For instance, the poem "With Lullay, lullay", which deals with a theft by a prostitute, seems to take the subject and some of its generic aspects from Catullus' Carmen X. Insults which are analogous to those directed at a hack poet in *Agaynste a Comely Coystrowne* appear in several satiric poems by Catullus (such us Carmina XXII or CV). Therefore, it seems that Skelton was attracted by Catullus' abusive language at the beginning of his career. We are all acquainted with Skelton's fondness for the flyting genre (a continuous sequence of insults, very successful in Scotland) and Catullus' *Liber* is the nearest thing in Latin poetry to medieval flyting. There will be examples of abusive poetry taken from Catullus throughout Skelton's work. To mention just one, in *Agenst Garnesche* he attacks his rival for the stench of his breath:

> Your brethe ys stronge and quike;
> Ye ar and eldyr steke;
> Ye wot what I thynke;
> At bothe endes ye stynke.
> (iii, 78-81)

In this case, Skelton is taking images from Carmina XCVII and XCVIII against Aemilius:

---

the Puritan period: "Among English writers, the Puritans could point to several whose lives would furnish grist for the mills of piety. Some of the tales about John Skelton, self-styled British Catullus, are not calculated to endear him to douce respectable people" (McPeek 1939:36).

Non (ita me di ament) quicquam referre putavi,
Utrumne os an culum olfacerem Aemilio.[6]
(XCVII, 1-2)

However, it is to some extent irrevelevant to pay attention to these abuses if we are to grasp Catullus' influx on Skelton: first, because they are merely anecdotic in his poetry; second, since Skelton does not see Catullus as a satiric poet, or at least, one of importance: in *Agenst Garnesche*, ll. 139-41, there is a list of "the famous poettes saturicall" and Catullus does not appear in it (though Skelton acknowledges that he imitates Martial's satire, and that is almost equivalent to being influenced by Catullus, since Martial followed Catullus' steps to a great extent). So, apparently, it is not as a satirist that Skelton regarded Catullus.

If we move on to longer poems, we notice a first step in his Catullan influence: this is represented by Skelton's *amplificatio* of the subject of Catullus' complete poems (and not merely their topics or images), especially when they are coarse, crude or, at least, immoderate. Though I am not referring now to the above-mentioned linguistic abuses, Skelton still takes Catullus as a source for 'non-poetic' elements, elements at the edge of literary decorum. Of course, I apply the concept of *amplificatio* as a link between both poets since Catullus' carmina are usually shorter than twenty lines, whereas Skelton's compositions normally go beyond several hundreds. But Skelton was a master in the use of *amplificatio*, as we can see in the poems against Wolsey, where he departs from thematic centres comprised in few lines and he expands them by repeating the same ideas once and again. The ideological weight of *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?* is enclosed in its first one hundred lines but Skelton, through amplificatio, extends the poem to 1.300 lines. In the following poems, Catullus must be seen as the core, which is spread and molded by Skelton at his will.

The example most of the critics mention is *Phyllyp Sparowe*. In *Phyllyp Sparowe*, Skelton writes an elegy for his lover's dead sparrow, the same as Catullus did in his famous poem "Lugete, O Veneris Cupidinisque", number III in his *Liber Catullianus*. Skelton's imitation reaches many categories in the poem: Catullus' bittersweet tone, a mixture of irony and tenderness for the girl, is similar to that used by Skelton to describe Jane Scrope. Both authors alternate in abrupt changes between the lack of rhetoric

---

[6] "I didn't —God help me!— think it made any difference / whether I sniffed at Emil's mouth or his arse" (Goold 1983:209).

and a pretended affectation: Catullus bursts into "At vobis male sit, malae tenebrae / Orci, quae omnia bella devoratis" (13-4),[7] as impassioned as Skelton's overblown speech against cats (ll. 273-323). Both share the willingness for flouting of the genre they use, the elegy, and conceive not just a parody of it, but a mixture of black humour and sensuality, extremely uncommon in their time. Even some of the secondary subjects are suggested in a similar way: for instance, the erotic games between Jane and the sparrow (what has been studied as "the phallic symbol" of the bird by Daileader, 1996) recall those of Lesbia with her pet: the ambiguity between innocence and sexuality receives the same treatment from both poets. The English writer is attracted by that coarse mixture of death, humor and love in Catullus' carmen, and the first part of *Phyllyp Sparowe* is just an elaboration of the elements present in "Lugete, O Veneris Cupidinisque".[8]

Striking similarities may also be found in *The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummynge* with several poems from the *Liber Catullianus*, especially Carmen XXXVII. In these compositions, we find a description of a low-class tavern and its mob of regulars: Catullus views the place and its visitors as the cause of his breaking with Lesbia, his lover; Skelton, for his part,

---

[7] "A curse upon you, accursed darkness / of Orcus, that consumes all pretty things" (Goold 1983:33).

[8] The presence of the Catullan theme in *Phyllyp Sparowe* has been acknowledged, among others, by Jusserand (1905:114), Berdan (1920:213-24), Lang (1929:151), Neilson and Thorndike (1930:81), Pollet (1962:71), Harrington (1963:144) and Spearing (1985:237). As far as I know, only one critic dissents: James McPeek denies the possibility of contact between both poems and suggests that the image of the woman with the sparrow comes from Ovid's "In morten psittaci", or his imitator Statius in "Psittaci dux volucrum". However, the connection between these two compositions and Skelton's elegy seems to be very hazardous, especially if we consider that their similarities are restricted to the central image of the bird. McPeek explains his search for these new sources with the fact that "in 1382 lines we find not one mention of Catullus amid a veritable host of authors, not one word in all abundance of Latin in the poem suggesting the phrasing of the *Carmina*, and not one allusion bearing on Catullus in all the gallimautry of classical allusions which the author was concoted" (McPeek 1939:58), but he is the only critic who does not find clear parallels or allusions between both poets. In any case, Skelton does not always reveal his models, as it happens in *The Bowge of Courte* and its obvious procedence from the Latin *Stultifera Navis* (not mentioned or rephrased by the English poet). McPeek's opposition to Catullan influence is so unconvincing that he must admit that "yet one hesitates to say that Skelton did not know the 'Sparrow Songs', for one has a feeling that Skelton knows much more than he sets down, that he may be consciously avoiding definite imitation at times" (1939:44) or that "even so, it is necessary to suspend judgement as to whether Skelton was vaguely recalling Catullus or some imitation of his poems, or avoiding, with an amazing independence, a servile imitation of the Catullan poems. Skelton is quite capable of the latter; one does not know where to have him" (1939:60).

seems to have had a dispute with the real Elynour Rumming, the owner of the tavern. In both poems we are shocked by the creation of a unpleasant, gloomy atmosphere, very different from that of merry taverns in the literature of the Middle Ages. The characters we meet in Catullus' XXXVII, XLIII, LXXI are parallel to those we find *in The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummynge*: a crude tableau of drunken men and women, who behave disgustingly (in fact, some of the scatological images in Skelton can be traced back to Catullus), etc. Moreover, the perspective from which we witness this picture in both cases is similar: the vision is neither comical nor moral but it shows a bitterness which is very uncommon in Skelton's time. Too many parallels suggest that Skelton found a source for his poem in Catullus' realistic and somber description.

From Catullus, Skelton takes not only these coarse elements, unusual in his time and so appealing to him. He also takes the excuse and defence against the censures he received for using them. In *Speke Parott*, facing the attacks of those who called him obscene, Skelton shields himself with a quotation from Martial: "Est michi lasciva pagina, vita proba". (l. 264): "My page is lascivious; my life upright". In fact, this idea is directly derived from Catullus, who wrote in his poem XVI: "Nam castum esse decet pium poetam / Ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est" (ll. 5-6).[9] Therefore, Skelton, maybe unconsciously, defined his responsability as a writer from Catullus.

We also find a significant parallel in their rejection to generic and rhetoric conventions in virtually every poem. Catullus is well-known for repudiating the traditional patterns from the Greek genres he dealt with: we have seen ludicrous funerary poems or innovating descriptions, but we can also remember his *epithalamia* or his *consolatios*. Skelton repeatedly manipulates the reader's expectations as he fragments medieval rhetoric, as has been claimed by Stanley Fish (1965:82-88). I do not mean to imply that Skelton got this practice from Catullus; many writers had done the same, even better, and Skelton's temperament needed no excuse for it. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that Skelton must have been aware of this device in Catullus: he certainly realised that they both felt the same disdain for rhetorical tradition, and this may be very helpful to explain his ultimate identification with the Latin poet.

In the next group of poems, the satires against Cardinal Wolsey, Skelton reaches a new level in his relationship with Catullus. Now, he does

---

[9] "For the dedicated poet has to be decent / though there's no need for his verses to be so" (Goold 1983:53).

not take rough, improper elements as he did before, above all because the register of these poems couldn't be so low: his criticisms against Wolsey were fierce, but Skelton is aware of the person he was addressing to, a Cardinal and Lord Chancellor, probably the most powerful person in England after the King. Therefore, the style of these poems could not resemble that of previous flytings (against Dundas or Garnesche) and Catullus' obscene language could not be of help.

On the contrary, in this second step, we detect the connection between both poets in their reflections on the act of writing and the value of literature. Skelton's compositions are mainly satires on the situation of his country and the corruption of its rulers, but behind the main subject there is a number of secondary ideas that evince Skelton's worries and obsessions, one of the most recurrent of which is his role as a poet. In casual verses Skelton reveals his thoughts and feelings about poetry and, in these moments, he recovers Catullus because their ideas are interchangeable most of the times.

It has been pointed out by several critics (Spearing 1985:234; Loewenstein 1984:620) that Skelton is extremely concerned with the question of literary fame, that he needs to ensure success after his death. This is a modern feature of this author, since it shows a concept of poetic fame unwonted in the Middle Ages, something he may have received from the Classical age. Catullus shared the same worry and, at times, it is possible to find very close formulations of this idea. For example, both poets threaten their rivals with the spectre of harmful notoriety: in Catullus' carmen LXXVIII and in *Ware the Hauke*, the target of their criticisms is warned that the seriousness of the attack lies not in what it says but in the fact that it will be recorded forever in their verses:

> Verum id non impune feres: nam te omnia saecla
> noscet et, qui sis, fama loquetur anus.[10]
> (Catullus LXXVIIIb, 3-4)

> How I, Skelton laureat,
> Devysed and also wrate
> Uppon a lewde curate [...]
> He shall be as now nameles,
> But he shall not be blameles,
> Nor he shall not be shameles.
> (Skelton *Ware the Hauke*, 33-40)

---

[10] "But you won't get away with it: for all generations shall / know you, and Fame in her old age will tell you what you are" (Goold 1983:197).

When these poets scold someone, they are aware of the power of their words: their offense will outlast them, and the destruction of one's future reputation is the greatest pain they can afflict. Accordingly, both poets use fame as an intimidatory device.

In this respect, we find another illustration of the topic of fame in their address to the Muses, when they implore for the survival of their works: both poets incarnate their books, represent them in bodily form, thus stressing the symbiotic relation between poet and poem: Catullus implores that "ut ergo / plus uno maneat perenne saeclo" (9-10)[11] in the opening poem of his *Liber*; Skelton, through the narrator of *Speke Parott*, prays that "when Parrot is ded, he dothe not putrefy" (213). In both cases there is a feeling of anxiety and fear, as if oblivion of the work would mean the death of the body. More examples can be shown of this attitude: both poets offer the image of the writer sending his works into the future, pushing them forward: "Go, little quaire" is repeated in *Speke Parott* and *The Garlande of Laurell*, the same metaphore Catullus used in his first poem. It is peculiar as well that these authors include their own names in their poems more repeatedly than any other writer of their times: Catullus seldom uses the first person in his carmina, he prefers to repeat his name, and the same feature appears in Skelton, whose most recurrent verse is "Skelton, poet laureate". Continuous self-naming is an exclusive mark of these two authors, that links them in their obsession for a place in the Palace of Fame.

Another characteristic shared by both poets is their conscious and intentional choice of the "speke playne", as Skelton calls it (*Collyn Clout*, l. 26). These writers meditate on the poetic diction of their periods and realise that they cannot agree with what they see as a lofty, rhetoric language used by their contemporaries. That is why they look for their literary identity in a different way of expression, consciously anti-rhetoric, a more natural and spontaneous style.[12] In some poems this aspect is taken to the extreme, with a remarkably vulgar language, and one can even perceive a hidden pride for it (no wonder Pope coined the epithet "beastly Skelton" after reading some parts of *The Tunnyng of Elynour Rummynge* or *Agenst Garnesche*). Probably the reasons for choosing this kind of expression were different in each case: according to poem XCVb, Catullus believed that this language conveyed better his feelings and that it distinguished him from those contemptible groups which used rhetoric in excess (orators, hack poets...): "Parva mei

---

[11] "it may / live on through the years for many an age to come" (Goold 1983:31).
[12] On the peculiarity of Skelton's poetic diction, see Fanego (1985).

mihi sint cordi monumenta sodalis / at populus tumido gaudeat Antimacho" (1-2).[13] Skelton prefers the informal style because it suits better his search of a language comprehensible for his readers (one of his main obsessions, expressed in the initial verses of *Collyn Clout*). Besides, as we read in *Speke Parott*, he also tries to avoid the falseness of courtly poets whose ideas are always hidden behind "metaphora and alegoria" (l. 202), that is, under the veil of rhetoric.[14] In any case, whatever the reason, both poets are the most prominent examples of the "plain style" of their periods: the language employed in Catullus' satiric poems or in several compositions by Skelton escapes from our idea of grandeur and the sublime in poetry.

We finally get to *The Garlande of Laurell*, Skelton's last poem of significance, where all the elements of connection we have mentioned fully develop and some new ones appear. Here we reach a third step in their relationship, a phase that concludes with the identification of Skelton as "Britannum Catullus". *The Garlande of Laurell* is Skelton's evaluation of his own artistic career, an attempt to find his own place in the literary world around him. In this allegorical crusade to get into the Palace of the Queen of Fame (a preoccupation Catullus shared as well), Skelton draws a self-portrait that agrees in many aspects respects with what we know about the Latin poet.

One needs not to remember those elements we have already mentioned, although we should not forget that they are also present in *The Garlande of Laurell*: mixture of genres and styles (it is clear in the eleven little poems dedicated to the women that sewed the garland, ll. 836-1085); the topic of fame and the survival of the work of art (in this case, with the symbol of the book "embellished and ornamented" to the extreme referring to his entire works, similarly to Catullus' first poem), etc. *The Garlande of Laurell* is a fitting conclusion to Skelton's poetry in which the features of previous compositions, including those which connected him with the Catullan carmina, are also present here.

A new element introduced in this poem is Skelton's recognition of the hardness of reaching poetic glory, that is, how ardous it is to become a good poet. At the gates of the Palace of Fame, Dame Pallas explains the conditions necessary to attain success in poetry, a long list indeed. This speech provokes a reflection in Skelton, who realises the seriousness of

---

[13] "Dear to my heart be the slender monument of my friend; but let the vulgar rejoice in their bloated Antimachus" (Goold 1983:207).

[14] This idea also appears in the *Liber Catullianus* with Carmina XXXVI or XLIV.

becoming a poet, a real poet, according to his pattern. "Sunt pauci rarique poetae", ('Poets are few and rare') Skelton writes in A *Replycation* (Dixi 5). Catullus had asserted the same in several poems: "milia cum interea quingenta Hatriensis in uno / versiculorum anno putidus evomuit" (Carmen XCV, ll. 3-4),[15] is not enough to become a poet. The poet is a gifted being; whether chosen by the Muses, if we believe Catullus, or by divine inspiration, according to Skelton, but in both cases the volition, and also the responsability, of a Higher Power is a constituent of the utmost importance.

This idea is not particular to these two poets, it is easy to remember more examples of writers with the same view. What is unique to them is the consequence which is drawn from it: Skelton, as Catullus did, sets out from the idea of the scarcity of good writers to recognise himself as almost the only true poet in his literary context. However crude it may sound, both seem to judge their contemporaries as deplorable false poets, far from the conditions posed by Dame Pallas. It is curious to compare the amount of offenses to hack poets in Catullus' work with the scarcity of praises to worthy poets; but even more impressive is to realise that there is not a single praise to any living author in Skelton's work. We can be sure that any time a living poet appears in a compositon by Skelton, he will be criticized or, worse, deprived of his name as a poet. Both Catullus and Skelton admit the greatness of writers in the past, but in their own times, they have the impression of being islands in a sea of clumsiness. Furthermore, this panorama of incompetency is not only annoying but also threatening. In their poems we feel the uneasiness of persecution, of oppression, as if all those bad poets were chasing them, as if they were being the target of all their pamphlets. One of the most repeated *loci* in Catullus is his defense against other writers: Carmina XIV, XXXVI, XLIV, etc. are rebukes to rival poets. In Skelton, practically every poem, especially in the last period, contains words of reproach to literary enemies: *Agenst Garnesche, Speke Parott, Why Come Ye Nat to Courte,* the *addenda* in *Phyllyp Sparowe,* and of course*, The Garlande of Laurell*. Both poets dramatize their contemporaries' envy, conveying the discomfort of belonging to a literary context that rejects them when —or because— they go beyond it.

By now, we better understand why Skelton identifies himself with Catullus at the end of *The Garlande of Laurell*: they share so many characteristics that it would be hard to avoid a feeling of empathy. However,

---

[15] "the Hatrian half a million verses in a single / year has been belching forth" (Goold 1983:207).

up till now, we have studied what Skelton had read from Catullus, not what he knew about him. Julia Gaisser (1993:25-28) informs us that most of the manuscripts or editions of the *Liber Catullianus* dispersed at the end of the Middle Ages contained a biographical sketch of Catullus. Writers like Jerome (and we know that Skelton is familiar with Jerome since he is quoted several times in *A Replycacion*), Sicco Polenton and others had created a specific profile of the Latin poet spread throughout Europe. Even the *editio princeps* of the *Liber Catullianus* opened with a brief description of the Latin poet by Polenton with the essential features which would reach posterity: his literary genius, his political dissent and his versatility:

> Valerius Catullus the lyric writer was born at Verona in the 163rd Olympiad, a year before Sallustius Crispus, in the terrible times of Marius and Sulla, on the day Plotinus first began to teach Latin rhetoric in Rome. He loved a girl of the first rank, Clodia, whom he called Lesbia in his poetry. He was very playful, and in his time he had few equals, and no superior in versifying. In jests he was especially charming, but in sober matters very serious. He wrote erotic poems and an epithalamium to Manlius. He died in the thirtieth year of his life and was buried with public mourning. (Gaisser 1993:26; her translation)

It is impossible to determine how much information about Catullus Skelton had, but certainly the more he knew, the more he must have felt the connection between them. Was he aware that Catullus had to choose between a foreign 'literary' language, Greek, and his own language, Latin, and that he opted for the latter? Skelton faced the same dilemma, Latin or English, and he chose the analogous option. Did he know that Catullus had problems with a rising nobility in Rome due to his support to old patricians? Skelton's controversy with Wolsey derived from the same social conflict.[16] Parallels like these would be enough to justify the fact that Skelton called himself "Britannum Catullum".

However there is still another detail that would call his attention for sure: in the Renaissance, Catullus was well-known as the first of the *Poetae Novi*, the New Poets. Cicero had labelled Catullus and his group as *Poetae Novi* or *Neoteri*, with a negative connotation, because they disregarded the literary tradition from Greece and began a revolution in Latin poetry. This reputation, once deprived of its negative meaning, reached the Renaissance

---

[16] Wolsey's rapid promotion in contrast with his humble origins (he was the son of a butcher) clearly irritated Skelton. Puns on this swift ennoblement are a constant in *Speke Parott*, *Collyn Clout* or *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte*.

and created a special, mythic image of Catullus. He was seen as a pioneer, "l'Innovatore" in Italian Renaissance, the writer who broke the chains of poetry (Gaisser 1993:197-8). In the Continent, when an author wanted to contravene literary tradition, he would imitate Catullus: Leonardo Bruni, Giovanni Pontano, etc. From my point of view, this is the main reason Skelton had to proclaim himself as the English Catullus: he was looking for the same reputation as a *Poeta Novus*, he wanted to be seen as another pioneer in his time.[17] Fish (1965:24) asserts how Skelton notices that he lives in a new period requiring a new model of poetry. Skelton feels that his work is different from everything written before, even different from his contemporaries. When he meets the English poets, Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate, in The *Garlande of Laurell* (ll. 386-441), we get the impression that he regards them as classical poets, that he feels he is living in a different age.[18] Skelton sees into the fact that the Middle Ages, and the poetic forms used until then, are over, so he tries to innovate with his verses and to be acknowledged for that. By calling himself the "British Catullus" he demands the label of *New Poet*, he wants to be, for the English letters, what Catullus meant in his time.[19]

A final point worth noting is the word "pium" in "pium vestrum Catullum Britannum". Editors of Skelton's poetry have translated this word as 'worthy', but I think it would be more accurate to use 'pious, devout' (with a religious meaning) and the reason can be found in Skelton's last work, *A Replycacion*. In this poem we notice the second and last mention of Catullus by Skelton where the former is compared to the biblical poet and prophet King David:

---

[17] "[Skelton] was referring to the fame that Catullus enjoyed as an uninhibited lyric poet even among people who presumably knew nothing of his poems" (McPeek 1939:95).

[18] It is very significative the appearance of the English poets at the end of a list of classical authors, without any distinction between them. Their archaic costumes and manners are relevant, too. It is especially striking in the case of Lydgate, almost contemporary to Skelton.

[19] It does not contradict David Loewestein's idea (1984:614) that "the list [of English poets] is both a modest and arrogant act: it establishes Skelton's debt to his forbears and implies [what] these great poets have taught him [...] The list, then, is one way Skelton places himself firmly within a literary tradition". However, Skelton's intention goes beyond and tries to present himself as a new stage in that literary tradition, a breakthrough in the English letters. The best proof is a comparison between this passage and similar appearances of the triad of poets in contemporary works, such as Douglas' *Palice of Honour* or Hawes' *Pastime of Pleasure*; these writers accept their inferiority with submissiveness and admit their dependence on them. Skelton recognizes their legacy but he will obtain the "garlande of laurell" his predecessors want (l. 397).

> Kyng David the prophete, of prophetes principall,
> Of poetes chefe poete, saint Jerome dothe wright [...]
> Flaccus nor Catullus with hym may nat compare,
> Nor solempne Serenus, for all his armony
> In metricall muses, his harpyng we may spare;
> For David, our poete, harped so meloudiously
> Of our savyour Christ in his decacorde psautry,
> That at his resurrection he harped out of hell
> Olde patriarkes and prophetes in heven with him to dwell.
> (329-342)

Catullus, as well as other lyrical poets, is inferior to King David because he has not received the divine gift to "harpe and syng / with his harpe of prophecy" (344-5) in other words, because he is a pagan poet. In Skelton's view, Catullus cannot be a complete poet since he has a basic flaw: he is not Christian, he cannot join prophecy and poetry, which is essential in Skelton's concept of art.[20] For that reason, when Skelton proclaims himself as the "British Catullus", he must add the adjective "pium", 'religious, Christian', in order to complete the idea he wants to express. Once added the concepts of Christianity and Englishness, Catullus seems to be the perfect model to imitate, according to Skelton.[21]

John Skelton was not only the poet who introduced Catullus in the English Renaissance, but probably, the one with the deepest understanding of him in the first half of the sixteenth century. To a certain extent, their lives, their ideas and their poetry were parallel and no one could have a better comprehension of Catullus than his. Catullus could be an important influence on Skelton's poetry, but it might be of a greater value to consider him a model for the English poet in his literary condition. Through Catullus, Skelton developed some of the features that made him a new poet; maybe not a Renaissance poet, but certainly not a medieval one, either.

---

[20] For a wider explanation of this concept see Fish (1965:13-16).

[21] McPeek's interpretation of "pium" as "chaste" (1939:97) is unsustainable if we confront it with the previous fragment from *A Replycacion*; Catullus could have been considered 'unchaste' in the English Renaissance (though it was never explicitly stated) but this demerit would never be attributed to the bucolic poet Aulus Septimius Serenus, nor to the oustanding Horace (Quintus Horatius "Flaccus"). Besides, the context clearly evinces the religious meaning (not sexual) of these verses.

References

Berdan, J. M. 1920: *Early Tudor Poetry, 1485-1547*. Hamden, Conn., Shoe String Press. Repr. 1961.

Daileader, C. R. 1996: When a Sparrow Falls: Women Readers, Male Critics and John Skelton's *Phyllyp Sparowe*. *PQ* 75: 391-409.

Fanego, T. 1985: En torno a John Skelton y algunos aspectos de su dicción poética. > Galván Reula, ed. *Estudios literarios ingleses. Edad Media.* Madrid, Cátedra. 285-308.

Fish, S. E. 1965: *John Skelton's Poetry*. New Haven, Yale University Press.

Gaisser, J. 1993: *Catullus and his Renaissance Readers*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Goold, G.P. ed. and trans.1983: *Catullus*. London, Duckworth.

Harrington, K. P. 1963: *Catullus and his Influence*. New York, Cooper Square.

Jusserand, J.J. 1905: *Histoire littéraire du peuple anglaise*. Paris, Firmin-Didot.

Lang, A. 1929: *History of English Literature from* Beowulf *to Swinburne*. London, Lond. & c. 4th ed. revised.

Loewenstein, D. A. 1984: Skelton's Triumph: *The Garland of Laurel* and Literary Fame. *Neophilologus* 68: 611-22.

McPeek, J.A.S. 1931: Did Chaucer Know Catullus? *MLN* 46: 353-362.

___. 1939: *Catullus in Strange and Distant Britain*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

Neilson, W. A. and Thorndike, A. H. 1930: *History of the English Literature*. London, MacMillan.

Pollet, M. 1962: *John Skelton. Contribution a l'Histoire de la Prérenaissance Anglaise*. Paris, Didier.

Scattergood, J. ed. 1983: *John Skelton. The Complete English Poems*. New Haven, Yale University Press.

Smith, P. 1923: *Erasmus*. New York, Harper.

Spearing, A.C. 1985: *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Author's address:
Universidad de Salamanca
Departamento de Filología Inglesa
Crta. Valladolid 20 B (Villares de la Reina)
Salamanca 37184, Spain
juanmacc@usal.es