

Paper 1
The Gods of Catullus and Plotinus
HUM 200

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Catullus and Plotinus were both born into the Roman Empire, Catullus in 84 BC and Plotinus in 204 AD. Both were polytheists and thought of a pantheon of gods, however they approached their belief differently. In the works studied: Poems #63 and #76 of Catullus and Plotinus' V.8 section 3 and 4, Catullus lays out his vision of passionate, angry, and dark gods while Plotinus has a view of beautiful, inward facing creatures of Intellect.

First, the wording. Catullus describes his gods with words like 'quivering, agile, goading.' Plotinus uses 'august, beautiful, unmoving, pure and wise always.' This captures the tone of the two authors. The gods of Catullus drive a man into madness, the gods of Plotinus look inwards towards their Intellect.

Catullus's poem #63 has a goddess who drives men insane. The goddess Cybele is mother of the savage earth. Her followers are the Maenad, 'given to ecstatic maddened howling, and wild chases through the woods.' (Note from #63). She is so potent she can convince a man (a wrestler from a civilized land) to castrate himself and run haggardly through the wild woods. She cares about the physical world, and the mindless mad creatures in it. She prefers madness, and bends the sane to become her worshippers.

Catullus's poem #76 has gods that care about mortals, and who can be asked for boons. They are, however, still 'hostile.' These gods can be asked help on very human problems, like Catullus's broken heart.

Plotinus has very different gods. His gods are sourced in Nature, but they are not the wild beasts of Cybele. They are perfect forms. Critically, 'they do not veer between wisdom and folly', they have a calm, stately existence. His gods have 'no admixture of the unstable.'

Beyond the stability of Plotinus's gods, they also do not care about worldly, imperfect mortal affairs. Unlike Catullus, they only dwell on perfect things, and perfect things are in the Intellect alone. Plotinus's can not be asked to 'lift this plague' from heartbroken men. Instead, if men model themselves after the gods and ignore physical pain and hardship they can prevail.

Drawing back from the direct discussion of the gods, what are the writers trying to convey? Plotinus is very direct. Through his discussion of how the gods operate, he is laying out a path for humans to follow. He want people to emulate the gods in their detachment and inward focus. He wants a world full of philosophers contemplating mathematics and reason. He has no interest in maddened people who castrate themselves and run around in the woods. He does not think that asking the gods to solve your eradicate your heartbreak is the correct path, he would prefer that you stop caring! Catullus has a roundabout way of expressing his views. The poem about Attis shows that he believes in vengeful gods who will, outside of your control, warp you, madden you and castrate you. In the end of that poem and in #76, he asks the gods to help and protect him. He believes that there is some power above reason and Intellect, and that the Intellect can be overridden by that power.

Plotinus and Catullus lived under the same Roman Empire, speaking the same Latin, but came to view the gods in very different ways. Catullus was a believer in emotional, irrational, but active gods, where Plotinus viewed the gods as unmoving, perfect beings who do not look down at imperfect mortals, let alone interfere in their affairs. It is very interesting how two men from relatively the same culture and with the same pantheon could find such orthogonal views of their gods. The only thing they can agree on is that the gods should be central to a man's concern!