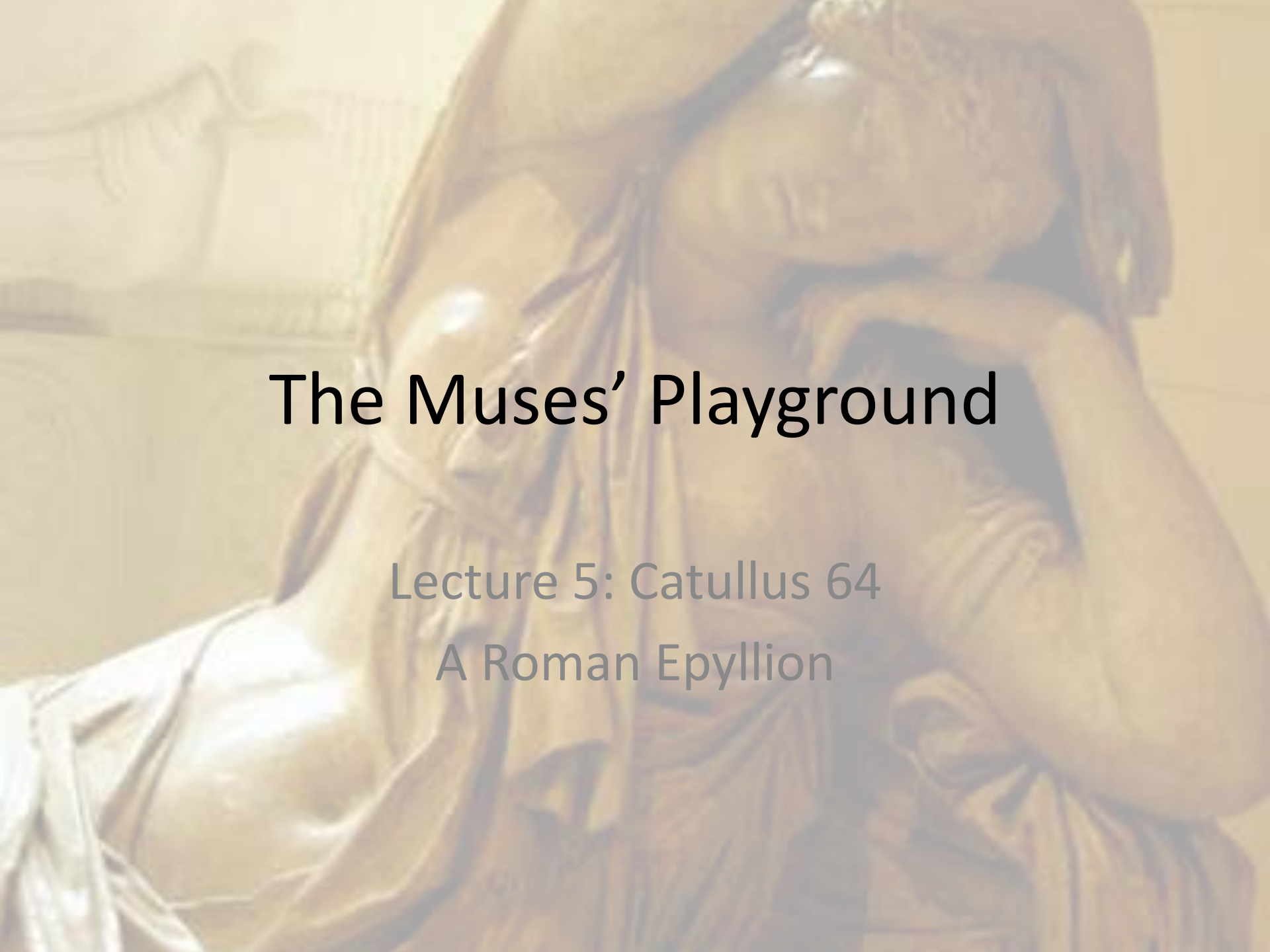




The Muses' Playground

Lecture 5: Catullus 64

A Roman Epyllion

The non-existent divide



The non-existent divide

- ‘When Roman poets do begin to write epic, they do so not as strangers to Greek literary culture, but as participants in a cultural transformation that had been shaping the entire Mediterranean world since the death of Alexander the Great.’

(Farrell, 2007, 428)

- ‘Greek learning, the knowledge not just of Greek texts, but of how Greeks studied their texts, was always a force in Roman literature.’

(Goldberg, 2007, 435)

The beginnings of Roman literature?

- The earliest extant evidence for epic literature at Rome is dated to roughly the same period as Apollonius
- However, grammarians make mention of songs of heroes of old sung at banquets potentially similar to Greek oral tradition
 - Similar practice at Rome tempting as scholars presuppose shared Indo-European roots for archaic literature in both cultures
 - In scholarship sometimes *carmina convivalia*
 - Also tempting to posit such a tradition as it would have conveyed ideas of early Roman history to later historiographers

Developing Roman epic

- Livius Andronicus, likely of Greek descent, dated to the second half of the 3rd C BC:
 - The *Odyssey* in Latin
 - Now only in fragments
 - Andronicus main work would, however, have been for the stage: comedy and tragedy
 - Saturnian verse
 - Influenced by Alexandrian criticism and practise, sometimes changing Homer's emphasis
 - Cf. Sheets, 1981

Developing Roman epic: Naevius

- Seemingly the first to write Latin epic on Roman history: the first Punic war (264-241 BC)
 - *At the time of the second Punic war the Muse with winged step / introduced her warlike self to Romulus' fierce race* (Porcius Licinus, 2nd C AD)
 - The connection of epic to national expansion will become increasingly relevant
- Again in Saturnian verse
- *Bellum Punicum* only one example of Naevius manifold production – like Andronicus, he also writes drama

Questions: early Roman epic

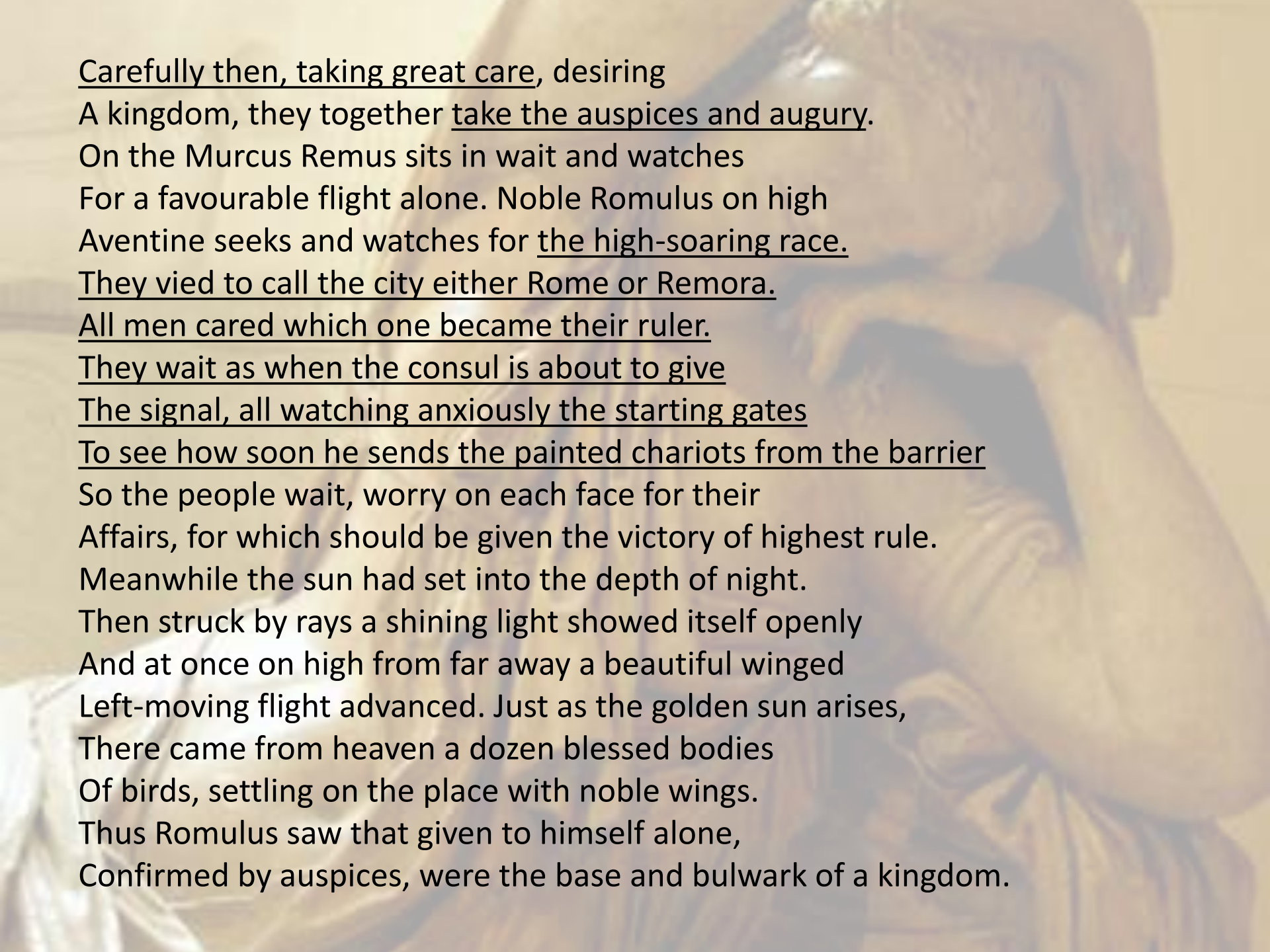
- Neither Livius Andronicus nor Naevius belonged to the upper classes – Andronicus of Greek descent, Naevius from Campania
- Both did more extensive work in other genres, and we have considerably more fragments of early Roman drama and satire than we do epic
- It is only with Ennius (3/2nd C BC) that writers seem to embrace the view that writing Roman epic should be the highest ambition of a poet

Continuities: Ennius' *Annals*

- Told the history of Rome from foundation to about 170 BC, Ennius' own times
- Opens with a dream sequence where a vision of Homer's spirit appears to the narrator: Ennius' *becomes* Homer
- The closer relationship to Homer encourages comparison, and makes the reader search for equivalents
 - On character level
 - On theme level

Continuities in change

- Uses the hexameter
 - Frowns on the earlier use of Saturnian verse:
 - ‘Others have written historical poetry, in the meter that fauns and satyrs used to sing’ (Enn. *Ann. Fr.* 7.1)
 - ...but is found by later Latin authors to have written clumsy and harsh verse himself
 - The hexameter affords easier resemblance to Homer
 - The hexameter more pliable to the creation of artistic effects
- Latin is not Greek – Ennian sound play is very different from Homer’s:
- Alliteration
- Redundancies (not repetition!)
- (Figura etymologica)
- Similes follow the Apollonian pattern of thematic connection
- Competition: note that this is literary competition!



Carefully then, taking great care, desiring
A kingdom, they together take the auspices and augury.
On the Murcus Remus sits in wait and watches
For a favourable flight alone. Noble Romulus on high
Aventine seeks and watches for the high-soaring race.
They vied to call the city either Rome or Remora.
All men cared which one became their ruler.
They wait as when the consul is about to give
The signal, all watching anxiously the starting gates
To see how soon he sends the painted chariots from the barrier
So the people wait, worry on each face for their
Affairs, for which should be given the victory of highest rule.
Meanwhile the sun had set into the depth of night.
Then struck by rays a shining light showed itself openly
And at once on high from far away a beautiful winged
Left-moving flight advanced. Just as the golden sun arises,
There came from heaven a dozen blessed bodies
Of birds, settling on the place with noble wings.
Thus Romulus saw that given to himself alone,
Confirmed by auspices, were the base and bulwark of a kingdom.

The contemporary backdrop

....the high-soaring race.

***They vied to call the city either
Rome or Remora.***

***All men cared which one
became their ruler.***

***They wait as when the consul
is about to give***

***The signal, all watching
anxiously the starting gates***

***To see how soon he sends the
painted chariots from the
barrier***

- The audience in the passage situated as the audience for the races in the Circus Maximus in the ludi Romani
- Romulus and Remus in a race of sorts
 - Remus implied to be the loser, mora = delay
- Ties together past and present, pulling readers in

Callimachean influences in early Roman epic

- Μέγα βιβλίον, μέγα κακόν
 - Cf. discussions of how Apollonius negotiates Callimachus' demands for a different epic text
- Also prompted a new form, the **epyllion**
 - 'Little epic'?
- Precedents:
 - Callimachus' *Hecale* seems to be a precedent
 - Missing moment featuring Theseus, survives in fragments only
 - Hesiod's (?) *Shield*
 - Combining both formal features and an epic topic
 - Originally transmitted as a part of Hesiod's catalogue poem of mythological women
 - The catalogue as a feature of epic poetry

Epyllion = Little Epic?

- Avoids the big stories of large-scale epic
- Focuses on lesser-known mythological moments set in the world of epic
 - Cf. the importance now of the minotaur
- Uses many of the forms and features familiar from epic
 - The ekphrasis, the metre, the inclusion of similes
- Intertexts particularly from epic texts
 - ‘Show me who your friends are...’

Epyllion and epic

- Locus classicus for ekphrasis: Shield of Achilles, *Iliad* 18
 - Cf. arming scenes
- Catullus' ekphrasis slightly different from its epic predecessors
 - Cf. direct speech of the characters
- ...but his text was clearly felt to belong in the epic genre
 - Dido in Verg. *Aen.* 4 on Aeneas and Cat. 64.154-157

But: Text-bound

- We saw in Apollonius Rhodius that allusions (to myth, to history, etc) which can only be resolved through reference to written texts become more prominent; applies also to Catullus
 - The change of medium to scrolls of papyrus: a reader can now ‘flick back and check’
 - The Callimachean aesthetics
 - The demand for a sophisticated reader
- Allusive and structurally complex: different from epic
 - Cf. largely chronological progression of stories in Homer
 - Familiar devices used to a much higher degree => may give a sense of unfamiliarity

The opening of Cat. 64

Once they say pine-trees born on the heights of Pelion / floated through Neptune's clear waves, to the River Phasis and Aeetes's borders, / with chosen men, oaks of the Argive people, / hoping to steal the Golden Fleece of Colchis / daring to course the salt deeps in their swift ship, / sweeping the blue waters with fir-wood oars. / That vessel was first to explore the unknown sea: / so, as she ploughed the windblown waters with her prow, / and whitened the churning waves with foam from the oars / the Nereids lifted themselves from the dazzling white / depths of the sea, amazed at this wonder of ocean. / In those, and other days, mortal eyes saw the sea-nymphs / raise themselves, bodies all naked, as far as their nipples, / from the white depths.

- What is the reader expected to recognise here?
- The identity of the ship: the Argo
- The identity of the men sailing her, including Peleus named only in line 19
- That there is a literary background of importance for the understanding of the text
 - 'Alexandrinian footnotes'
 - Plural >< selectiveness

Changing Apollonius

Then Peleus, they say, was inflamed with love of Thetis, / then Thetis did not despise marriage with a mortal, / then Jupiter himself agreed to Thetis's marriage. / O heroes, born in a chosen age, hail, godlike race! / O offspring of a blessed mother, hail once more. / Often I'll address you, in my song. / And I address you, so blessed in your fortunate marriage, / chief of Pelian Thessaly, to whom Jupiter himself / creator of gods, yielded his beloved: / did not Thetis possess you, loveliest of Nereids? / Did not Tethys allow you to lead off her grand-daughter, / and Oceanus, who embraces the whole world with sea? / When at the time appointed the longed-for flames arise, / all of Thessaly crowds together to the palace, / the halls are filled with a joyful assembly: / they bring gifts with them, declaring their joy in their looks.

- Compact version of Apollonius' story: Peleus and Thetis married well before the sailing of the Argo in other versions
- This timing likely a Catullan invention
- Commenting on inconsistencies: By changing the timing of the story overtly, Catullus copies the flexible relationship AR himself enjoys with time (juggling details of Theseus' career as needed)
- Conflation of two passages:
 - On the topmost peaks the Pelian nymphs marvelled / as they looked upon the work of Itonian Athena and at / the heroes themselves, wielding the oars with their arms (AR 1.549-552)
 - Passage from AR 4, describing their sailing from Colchis
- Invocation of heroes of a time past – metapoetic connotations?
 - Cf. 'embroidered with old-time human

Playing with Apollonius

- Conflation of two passages:
 - On the topmost peaks the Pelian nymphs marvelled / as they looked upon the work of Itonian Athena and at / the heroes themselves, wielding the oars with their arms (AR 1.549-552)
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- Invocation of heroes of a time past – metapoetic connotations?
 - Cf. ‘embroidered with old-time human figures’ Cat. 64.50

One structure for Cat. 64

- Frame story: Wedding of Peleus and Thetis
 - 50-264 Ekphrasis
- Frame story: Wedding of Peleus and Thetis
 - 323-381 Song by the Fates
 - 384-408 Lament for the changing times
- Questions prompted:
 - How does the story contained in the ekphrasis impact on the frame story?
 - How do the intertexts used by Catullus impact on the frame story?
 - ...what kind of a text IS this?