

Catullus 64: Unity and Meaning

A) Catullus: biography

born c. 84 BC in Verona, son of local aristocrat; died c. 54 BC. Wrote poetry on a variety of subjects, in a variety of metres (including elegiac and hexameter)

B) Contrast of epilogue with rest of the poem: decline in morals from heroic age?

1) “For long ago Heaven’s Dwellers in person used to visit / The chaste homes of heroes and show themselves at mortal / Meetings, while religion was not yet held in scorn. / Often the Father of Gods, enthroned in shining temple, / When with their festal days his annual rites had come, / Would watch one hundred bull slump prostrate to the ground.” (Cat. 64.383-9)

2) “Our evil madness by confounding fair with foul / Has turned away from us the Gods’ forgiving thoughts./ Wherefore they neither deign to visit such meetings / Nor let themselves be touched by light of day or eye.” (Cat. 64.405-8)

undercutting of claims of epilogue

i) earlier presence of impiety e.g. human sacrifice; perjury of Theseus (Ariadne and Aegeus)

3) “So, sailing off, contemptuous of the Gods’ will, / You carry home, ah heedless, accursed perjury?” (Cat. 64.134-5)

ii) earlier fratricide

4) “Brothers poured the blood of brothers on their hands” (Cat. 64.398)

iii) filial disloyalty (cf. Ariadne; Theseus)

5) “Sons no longer grieved when parents passed away” (Cat. 64.400)

6) “... the daughter leaving her sire’s face, / Leaving the embrace of blood-sister and even of mother / Who grieved in desperation for her wretched child” (Cat. 64.117-9, of Ariadne)

iv) lust (cf. e.g. Pasiphae; Ariadne passionate like mother?)

7) “Father prayed for death of son in his first youth / So as freely to possess the bloom of a new bride, / Mother, lying impiously with ignorant son, / Dared impiously to sin against divine Penates.” (Cat. 64.401-4)

decline in happiness from the heroic age?

i) gods then favouring men? NB Jupiter’s selfish avoidance of Thetis because of oracle (tipped off by Prometheus) and punishment of Prometheus for gift of fire

8) “Peleus, to whom Jove himself, / The Father of the Gods himself resigned his love.” (Cat. 64.26-7)

9) "... Zeus and glorious Poseidon strove for the hand of Thetis, both of them desiring her to be his beauteous bride, for love enthralled them. Yet the immortal counsels of the gods did not bring that marriage to pass, when they had heard a certain oracle. For Themis, wise in counsel, spake in their midst, saying how that it was fated that the sea-queen should bear a princely son, who would be stronger than his father... if she were wedded either to Zeus or to his brethren." (Pindar, *Isthmian Odes* 8.27ff.; tr. Sandys)

10) "Prometheus of crafty heart, / Bearing faded traces of the ancient punishment /Which formerly, with limbs fast bound by chain to flint, / He paid by hanging over a sheer precipice." (Cat. 64.294-7)

ii) gods then mingling with men? Not in wedding

11) "The guests dispersed on roving feet each to his home. / And after their departure, first of all, from Pelion's / Summit Chiron came" (Cat. 64.277-9)

iii) signs of decline in heroic age through Golden Age myth (gold> silver> bronze> heroic> iron): need of farming (unlike Golden Age); first ship (sign of Iron Age). Things in decline for ever

12) "First of all the deathless gods ... made a golden race of mortal men who lived in the time of Cronos when he was reigning in heaven. And they lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things; for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods." (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 109ff.; tr. H. G. Evelyn-White)

13) "But when the earth had covered this generation [i.e. the bronze] also, Zeus the son of Cronos made yet another, the fourth, upon the fruitful earth, which was nobler and more righteous, a god-like race of hero-men who are called demi-gods, the race before our own, throughout the boundless earth. Grim war and dread battle destroyed a part of them, some in the land of Cadmus at seven-gated Thebe when they fought for the flocks of Oedipus, and some, when it had brought them in ships over the great sea gulf to Troy for rich-haired Helen's sake" (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 156ff.; tr. H. G. Evelyn-White)

14) "None tills the soil; the necks of oxen become soft. / No low-grown vine is cleared of weeds by bent-pronged rake. / No bullock cleaves the clod with deep-driven ploughshare. / No pruner's hook thins out the shade of leafy trees. / Slovenly rust attacks the solitary ploughs." (Cat. 64.38-42)

15) "Its prow inured raw Amphitrite to ships' courses" (Cat. 64.11)

16) "watching Theseus sailing off with his fast fleet" (Cat. 64.53; sailing before the "first ship", the Argo)

C) Genre and form

i) epic: hexameters; stately diction. Seems as though going to be an *Argonautica*

17) “Pines in the past, *born (prognatae)* from the brow of Pelion (*Peliaco*)” (Cat. 64.1)

18) “When chosen (*lecti*) young men, oaks (*robora*) of Argive adulthood, / Eager to rob the Colchians of a gilded hide, / Ventured the voyage past salt shoals in a swift hull, / *Sweeping (uerrentes)* blue-green (*caerulea*) levels with palms of silver fir.” (Cat. 64. 4-7;)

19) “*Verrunt extemplo placide mare marmore flauo; / caeruleum spumat sale conferta rate pulsum.*” (Ennius fr. 372-3; tr. E. H. Warmington) (“Forthwith they gently *swept* a sea of yellow marble; *green* foamed the brine beaten by the thronging ships”)

ii) tragedy: Argonauts topic; engagement with Ennius and Euripides

20) “Would that the Argo had never winged its way to the land of Colchis through the dark blue Symplegades! Would that pine trees had never been felled in the glens of Mount Pelion and furnished oars for the hands of the heroes who at Pelias’ command set forth in quest of the Golden Fleece! For then my lady Medea would not have sailed to the towers of Iolcus, her heart smitten with love for Jason...” (Eurip. *Medea* 1-8; tr. D. Kovacs)

21) “*Would that (utinam)* the firwood timbers had not fallen to earth hewn by axes in a Pelian grove; and that thereupon no prelude had been made to begin the ship which is now known by the name of Argo, for that *chosen (delecti)* Argive heroes were carried in it when they were seeking the golden fleece of the ram of Colchis, by trickery, at the behest of King Pelias. For thus never would my misled mistress Medea, sick at heart, smitten by a savage love, have set foot outside her home.” (Ennius *Medea* fr. 253-61; tr. E. H. Warmington)

22) “*if only (utinam)* in that first of times / Cecropian hulls had never touched the Cnossian shore” (Cat. 64.171f.)

iii) erotica

23) “In that and not another day’s light mortal eyes / Beheld the bodies of the Nymphs of Ocean naked / Far as the sucklers standing out from the white surge.” (Cat. 64.16-8)

24) “Not keeping fine-spun snood upon her golden head, / Not covered by light raiment over veiled bosom, / Not tied about the milky paps with rounded band, / All which had slipped down off her body in disarray” (Cat. 64.63-5)

iv) hymn

25) “O born in a time of all the ages too much missed, / Hail, heroes, breed of Gods! O noble progeny / Of mothers beautiful, I hail you once again! / I shall invoke you often, invoke you in my song...” (Cat. 64.22-4)

26) “Hail! greatly hail! most high Son of Cronus, giver of good things, giver of safety. Thy works who could sing? There hath not been, who shall sing the works of Zeus. Hail! Father, hail again!” (Callim. *Hymn* 1.90-3; tr. A. W. Mair)

27) “Be gracious, race of blessed chieftains!” (Apollonius, *Argonautica* 4.1773; tr. R. Seaton)

v) heroine's lament (Ariadne in ecphrasis)

vi) (perverse) epithalamium (wedding song)

vii) didactic moralizing conclusion: cf. Hesiod's *Works and Days* (myth of ages); Aratus' *Phaenomena* (myth of ages, departure of justice)

28) "The father will not agree with his children, nor the children with their father, nor guest with his host, nor comrade with comrade; nor will brother be dear to brother as aforetime. Men will dishonour their parents as they quickly grow old, and will carp at them, chiding them with bitter words, hard-hearted they, not knowing the fear of the gods" (Hesiod *Works and Days* 182ff.; tr. H. G. Evelyn-White)

29) "all evicted Justice from their greedy thoughts" (Cat. 64.398; cf. Hesiod's prediction of departure of Shame and Nemesis)

epyllion: Hellenistic (e.g. Callimachus' *Hecale*, Theocritus' *Hylas*, Moschus' *Europa*); Neoteric (e.g. Cinna's *Zmyrna*, Calvus' *Io*); later Latin epyllia (e.g. the Aristaeus/Orpheus episode in Vergil *Georgics* 4; Baucis and Philemon in Ovid *Metamorphoses* 8; pseudo-Vergilian *Ciris*)

30) "The term 'epyllion' is sometimes applied by modern scholars to poems written in epic hexameters but on a small scale, dealing often with epic themes in novel, witty and surprising ways" (N. Hopkinson, *A Hellenistic Anthology*, p.200)

31) "so great were the differences in length (c. 75-c. 1500 lines), style, subject-matter and treatment that closer definition is hardly possible." (N. Hopkinson, *A Hellenistic Anthology*, p.200)

emphasis on craftsmanship; placing of unexpected centre stage (e.g. Callimachus' *Hecale* has Theseus sheltering in hut of old woman on way to kill Marathonian bull)

32) "The narrative does not progress in an even and straightforward manner; sometimes important events may be dismissed in a few lines, while elsewhere the poet will linger lovingly over the minutest details..." (A. S. Hollis, *Hecale*, p.25)

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