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A Commentary on Ovid's *Heroides* 10.21-56

Gary Cunningham

Epistulae Herodiam X

21 *interea toto clamanti litore "Theseu!"*
reddebant nomen concaua saxa tuum
 23 *et quotiens ego te, totiens locus ipse uocabat;*
ipse locus miserae ferre uolebat opem.
 25 *Mons fuit: apparent frutices in vertice rari;*
hinc scopulus raucis pendet adesus aquis.
 27 *adscendo (uires animus dabat) atque ita late*
aequora prospectu metior alta meo.
 29 *inde ego (nam uentis quoque sum crudelibus usa)*
uidi praecipiti carbasa tenta Noto.
 31 *ut uidi indignam quae me uidisse putarem,*
frigidior glacie semianimis fui.
 33 *nec languere diu patitur dolor; excitor illo,*
excitor et summa Thesea uoce uoco.
 35 *"quo fugis?" exclamo "scelerate reuertere Theseu!*
flecte ratem! numerum non habet illa suum!"
 37 *Haec ego: quod uoci deerat, plangore replebam.*
uerbera cum uerbis mixta fuere meis.
 39 *si non audires, ut saltem cernere posses,*
iactatae late signa dedere manus;
 41 *candidaque imposui longae velamina uirgae*
scilicet oblitos admonitura mei.
 43 *iamque oculis ereptus eras: tum denique fleui;*
torpuerant molles ante dolore genae.

45 *quid potius facerent, quam me mea lumina flerent,*
 postquam desieram vela videre tua?
47 *aut ego diffusis erravi sola capillis,*
 qualis ab Ogygio concita Baccha deo;
49 *aut mare prospiciens in saxo frigida sedi,*
 quamque lapis sedes, tam lapis ipsa fui.
51 *saepe torum repeto, qui nos acceperat ambos,*
 sed non acceptos exhibiturus erat,
53 *et tua, quae possum pro te uestigia tango*
 strataque quae membris intepuere tuis.
55 *incumbo lacrimisque toro manante profusis*
 'pressimus', exclamo, 'te duo: redde duos!'

The passage above is taken from the tenth epistle in Ovid's collection of poems known to us as the *Heroides*. It is a group of fifteen poetic epistles written in elegiac couplets, each from a different woman of ancient myth (with the exception of the letter from Sappho, who was an actual person of course), written to her lover or husband. In each case, the heroine has come to be separated from her lover, and her epistle is one of lament over the separation which is sometimes wilful on the part of the male hero, and at other times a circumstance of fate or divine intervention, as in the case of Penelope and Ulysses. This paper examines Ovid's rendition of the story of Ariadne and Theseus through his epistolary poem, and will explore modern scholarship comparing Ovid's and Catullus' versions of Ariadne along with my own thoughts on the similarities and differences, and Ovid's own depiction of Ariadne as a woman who is beside herself with emotion, though not necessarily over the loss of her lover.

Background

In *Heroides* 10, Ariadne, daughter of King Minos of Knossos (on Crete), writes to her lover Theseus, as he has just clandestinely departed the island of Dia without her.¹ Here we find

¹ Catullus (*Carmen* 64) refers to Theseus as Ariadne's spouse (*Catull.* 64.123), Ovid does not.

Ariadne just as Ovid describes her earlier in his *Metamorphoses*, ‘*desertae et multa querenti*’ (deserted and full of grief) (Ov. *Met.* 8.176). Ovid was apparently fond of the myth, using it not only in his *Heroides*, but in *Metamorphosis*, and later in *Ars Amatoria*, and *Fasti*. Ovid’s epistolary poem contains frequent allusions to Catullus’ sixty-fourth poem, in which Ariadne and Theseus appear in the tapestry on the wedding couch of Thetis and Peleus. Predating Ovid by a generation, Catullus features Ariadne and Theseus in an ekphrasis, a divergent story within a story.² As the wedding guests of Thetis and Peleus gaze upon a magnificently embroidered tapestry depicting scenes from the legends of ancient heroes (‘*heroum mira uirtutes*’) *Catull.* 64.51. Catullus’ Ariadne seems comes to life, not just as a static figure on a piece of cloth, but as an animated person. Ovid’s references to Catullus should not be surprising given his high regard for his predecessor. In his *Amores*, Ovid imagines Catullus after death in the paradise of Elysium wearing a crown of ivy (Ov. *Am.* 3.9.59-62).

The tale of Ariadne and Theseus is well-attested in art and literature of the archaic and classical periods. It is at least as old as Homer’s *Odyssey* in which Ariadne is said to have been slain by Aphrodite as retribution for the former’s romantic involvement with Dionysus (Hom. *Od.* 11.321-5). Ariadne was popular as a subject on Greek vase painting going back to at least the early fifth century BCE, and on the walls of Roman dwellings where the tale of her and Theseus is depicted as manifestation of what Florence Verducci calls the ‘Latin attraction for the pathetic- erotic.’³ And while Ariadne is not the only one of Ovid’s heroines depicted in Roman art, a sampling of scenes from Pompeii may be an indication of her popularity since we find

² Assuming Ovid’s *Heroides* dates to between 25 and 1 BCE. Jacobson 1973: 312ff, cited in Smith 1994: 248.

³ Verducci 1985: 12. Also, 245; Knox 1995: 234; Hornblower and Spawforth 2003: 1509.

there more images of Ariadne than of any other of the heroines.⁴ Ariadne was in fact *publica materies* in Ovid's world of the first-century BCE.⁵

Classical Rome accepted that hexameter verse was the meter of war, while elegiac couplets were the language of lament, and also as the language of love.⁶ As Horace wrote:

res gestae regumque ducumque et tristia bella
quo scribi possent numero, monstravit Homerus;
versibus inpariter iunctis querimonia primum...
(Hor. *Ars P.* 73-5)

Alden Smith asserts that the objective of Ariadne's plea in the *Heroides* is to convince Theseus to return to her whereas the aim of Catullus' heroine is to condemn Theseus for leaving her.⁷ This seems to violate the convention in the *Heroides* framed by Lindheim when she says Ovid's heroines present themselves as women who are 'marginal and helpless' and who 'highlight not their own freedom as epistolary writers to shape the narrative as they see fit but rather the constraints placed upon what they write by their all-consuming preoccupation with their addressees.'⁸ But Ariadne's preoccupation is not with Theseus, but with her own plight, as I discuss below.

Ariadne's Sorrow

⁴ Verducci 1985: 12.

⁵ Verducci 1985: 12.

⁶ Smith 1994: 264.

⁷ Smith 1994: 251.

⁸ Lindheim 2003: 35, 75.

We need to look to Catullus for some of the background to Ariadne's sorrow. First, in addition to losing Theseus, by leaving Crete she has lost her father, mother, and her sister which she left behind '*Thesei dulcem...amorem*' ('for the sweet love of Theseus') *Catull.* 64.120.⁹ Secondly, we should consider the physical location of the story as told by both Ovid and Catullus. There are a number of inhabited islands between Knossos, Ariadne's and Theseus' point of departure on Crete, and their destination of Athens. Some ancient traditions place the tale on the island of Naxos while others place it on Dia.¹⁰ The placement of Ariadne on Naxos has merit since that is the mythical birthplace of Dionysus, and one version of the story has Ariadne romantically involved with Dionysus after her abandonment by Theseus.¹¹ But Naxos was economically prosperous during the Bronze Age and become a military power during the classical period.¹² Conversely, Dia is a deserted island. We know Ovid places the events on Dia from his *Metamorphoses* (8.174), and from *Ars Amatoria* where he places the story, '*brevis aequoreis Dia feritur aquis*' (where tiny Dia is beaten by waters of the sea) (*Ov. Ars am.* 1.528). This is important to Ovid's rendition of the drama as Ariadne is depicted full of sorrow, partially for the loss of her lover, but more so over her probably abbreviated solitary existence. Ovid's Ariadne laments not so much because she is devastated at the loss of Theseus, but because of her plight being marooned on a deserted island, separated from her family, and perhaps doomed to die there.¹³ She complains later in her letter that she is unable to return to Crete, even if she were to be rescued, '*accessus terra paterna negat*' (line 64).

⁹ Goold 2000: 107; Armstrong 2006: 201.

¹⁰ Armstrong 2006: 6, 191.

¹¹ Knox 1995: 234; Hornblower and Spawforth 2003: 1031; Armstrong 2006: 191.

¹² Hornblower and Spawforth 2003: 1031.

¹³ Verducci 1985: 261.

Since the island on which Ariadne has been stranded is deserted and she is alone, it is altogether unclear as to how Ariadne imagines her letter will ever be read by Theseus who is at the time of the writing sailing away, most likely toward his home in Athens.¹⁴ Other heroines of Ovid's epistolary poems have some hope of their missives reaching their addressees. Penelope, for instance, even says of her letters to Ulysses that she puts them into the hand of every passing sailor: *quisquis ad haec vertit peregrinam litora puppim...traditur huic digitis charta notata meis* (Ov. *Her.* 1.59,62). But part of Ariadne's plight is that she can have no hope that her complaints to Theseus will ever reach him, thereby increasing her frustration over being abandoned.

Ariadne laments to Theseus telling of her '*miseræ*' (line 24) with her tender eyes numb with grief, '*torpuerant molles...dolore genae*' (line 44), prior to bursting into tears that soak the cushion of the bed she had shared with Theseus, '*lacrimisque toro manante profusis*' (line 55). But relatively few of those tears are shed over a longing for Theseus. She complains of the inhospitable landscape with cliffs eaten away by the harsh seas ('*scopulus raucis...adesus aquis*'), and cruel winds ('*ventis...crudelibus*'), as she sits upon a cold stone ('*saxo frigida*') worrying over her fate. Ariadne's image of herself lying dead and unburied on the shore is an allusion again to Catullus in which Ariadne laments that her body will lie in the open without a tomb for the birds and wild beasts to prey upon ('*pro quo dilaceranda feris dabor alitibusque praeda, neque iniacta tumulabor mortua terra*') Catull. 64.153. These complaints are not those of a woman who longs for a lost lover, but of one who is frightened over her precarious circumstances.

Ariadne's Madness

¹⁴ Verducci 1985: 252.

Florence Verducci asserts that each one of Ovid's heroines has a particular 'disordered' quality that is obvious to the reader.¹⁵ The irrational state in which Ariadne finds herself is evident in Ariadne's narrative of her own plight. As Verducci points out Ariadne writes 'almost as an objective observer might describe her.'¹⁶ This is strangely conveyed in her letter, as borrowed from Catullus: '*saepe illam perhibent ardenti corde furem clarisonas imo fuisse ex pectore voces*' ('Often in the madness of her burning heart they say that she uttered piercing cries from her inmost breast' (*Catull.* 64.125 (trans. Cornish)). The adjective Catullus uses here is *furem*, related to *furor*: raving, wild excitement, or delirium.¹⁷ Of course, Ovid's Ariadne does not refer to herself in this manner, but her peculiar behaviour, as related in her letter to Theseus, certainly indicates some sort of delirium. Ovid even explicitly states as much in *Ars Amatoria*, '*Cnosis...amens errabat*' ('She of Knossos wandered, out of her senses') (*Ov. Ars am.* 1.527). Rebecca Armstrong points out Ariadne's rather ridiculous 'tendency to reproach inanimate things for her present grief—the bed, the wind, sleep, faith.'¹⁸

In another allusion to Catullus, Ariadne frantically searches for a sign of Theseus' ship, climbing a hill to scan the seas: '*Mons fuit... Adscendo...atque ita late aequora prospectu metior alta meo*' (There was a mountain...I climb...and I scour the wide, deep sea with my gaze) (lines 25, 27-8). Compare this to Catullus in which Theseus' father searches the sea for his son from the top of his citadel: '*at pater, ut summa prospectum ex arce petebat*' (but his father, strives to look out from the highest citadel) *Catull.* 64.241.

¹⁵ Verducci 1985: 28.

¹⁶ Verducci 1985: 249.

¹⁷ Smith and Lockwood 2004: 289.

¹⁸ Armstrong 2006: 234.

In Ovid, as another sign of her delusion, the landscape anthropomorphically seems to taunt Ariadne as she calls out to Theseus, with the hollow rocks (*'concava saxa'*), mocking her, echoing back his name (*'reddebant nomen ...tuum'*). Though Ariadne initially seems to misinterpret this, thinking instead that, *'ipse locus miserae ferre volebat opem'* (the place itself wished to aid me in my misery)(line 24). Ariadne alludes to this idea of nature opposing her later in her letter (line 117), where she complains that the wind has joined with sleep and trust in conspiring against her (*'in me iurarunt somnus uentusque fidesque'*).

Theseus' Forgetfulness

Rebecca Armstrong points out that while Catullus' coverlet depicts the *'uirtutes'* (line 51) of ancient heroes, there is nothing obviously virtuous about Theseus's abandonment of Ariadne on a deserted island while she sleeps.¹⁹ However, Verducci cites lines 247-8 *'qualem Minoidi luctum obtulerat mente immemori, talem ipse recepit'* ('himself received such sorrow as he by his forgetful mind had caused for the daughter of Minos') as possibly absolving him of an intentional wrong-doing.²⁰

While no firm explanation for the abandonment reason is provided by Catullus or Ovid, there was a tradition that put the blame on Dionysus for Theseus leaving Ariadne out of forgetfulness.²¹ This would make some sense given the tradition that Ariadne later marries Dionysus.²² Whether Theseus ever loved Ariadne may be debated. It may be that Ariadne was a

¹⁹ Armstrong 2006: 189.

²⁰ Verducci 1985: 261.

²¹ Armstrong 2006: 214 cites Philostr. *Imag.* 1.15.1 and Theoc. *Id.* 2.46.

²² Armstrong 2006: 214.

useful tool in Theseus' fight against the Minotaur and escape from Crete. He did not do so out of love or attraction.²³

Armstrong makes the point that Catullus' use of the term, *immemor* (lines 123, 135 and 248), to describe Theseus' abandonment of Ariadne implies 'a culpable, despicable disregard for the requirements of friendship.'²⁴ Ovid's Ariadne only implies Theseus' forgetfulness when she shouts for him to turn his ship around because he has left one of her number, '*flecte ratem! numerum non habet illa suum!*' (line 36). While Ariadne seems to be blaming Theseus' absent-mindedness here, hopeful against the thought of intentional abandonment, in the preceding verse she had accused Theseus of being wicked (*scelerate*). How can Ariadne realistically believe that Theseus has left her by mistake? And why does she contradict herself within the space of a few verses? Either Theseus is deceitful and left Ariadne intentionally, or he is forgetful and left her by mistake. Verducci cites this as an example of what she sees as Ovid's 'comic' approach, even suggesting a parody of Catullus.²⁵ But I would suggest this is yet another example of the delirium Ovid has imbued upon his Ariadne. Furthermore, it might be that Ovid's portrayal here is intentionally in contrast to the legendary Cretan disposition toward untruthfulness.²⁶

Ariadne and Bacchus

As mentioned above, one version of the myth includes Ariadne's romantic involvement with, and marriage to, Bacchus, during which she is given the bridal crown of the sea nymph Thetis, mother of Achilles.²⁷ Recall that it was the marriage of Thetis and Peleus that was the subject of the main narrative in Catullus' poem, though Catullus does not mention the gift of

²³ Kinsey 1965: 919.

²⁴ Armstrong 2006: 195.

²⁵ Verducci 1985: 260.

²⁶ Armstrong 2006: 3, 13.

²⁷ Armstrong 2006: 188.

Thetis' wedding bridal crown. Catullus does venture further into the tale's extended version in which Bacchus burns with love for Ariadne and seeks her out ('*te quarens, Ariadne, tuoque incensus amore*') Catull. 64.253. Ovid's version only alludes to the later episode, but the references are quite intriguing. Armstrong points out the simile of Ariadne appearing 'like a Bacchante' being a significant allusion to Catullus and others.²⁸ In Catullus, Ariadne '*sexea ut effigies bacchantis prospicit*' (appears like a stone image of a Bacchante) but in Ovid we find Ariadne saying that while sitting on a cold stone looking out to sea, she '*quamque lapis sedes, tam lapis ipsa fui*' (and as much as I sat upon stone, I myself became stone) (line 50) in reference to her state of mind, being stripped of the prospect of being with her lover, and of being marooned on a deserted island.

There is a double allusion to Catullus in these verses. As I have already pointed out, Ovid's Ariadne is suffering from delirium, and Catullus references a group of Bacchantes who raving madly and beating drums with their hands. In another allusion back to Catullus and to the tradition of Ariadne's involvement with Bacchus, Ariadne complains '*ego diffusis erravi sola capillis, qualis ab Ogygio concita Baccha deo*' (I wandered about with my hair tossed, such like a Bacchante driven by the Ogygian god)(line 47). Ovid's reference to Bacchus is rather unique here in that nowhere else in Roman literature before the first century CE is Bacchus referred to as *Ogygius*, and Ovid uses the epithet only this once.²⁹ Verducci posits that the use of the word is for dramatic effect, being a particularly 'ugly' word in direct and intentional contrast to Catullus' epithet, '*florens*'.³⁰

²⁸ Armstrong 2006: 233.

²⁹ Verducci 1985: 251.

³⁰ Verducci 1985: 252.

Ariadne's 'Sails'

Ariadne describes herself climbing the hill to scan the seas for Theseus, removing her veil and hanging it from a tree limb. The white shining veil hung out on the limb is an allusion to the white sail that Theseus had forgotten to fly on this ship when returning home from Crete.³¹ Catullus tells us the story and his verses point back to Theseus' forgetfulness, not only of his father's instructions, '*oblito dimisit pectore*' (line 208) but also of Ariadne, '*liquerit immemori discedens pectore coniunx*' (line 123). Ovid's Ariadne describes the scene: '*candidaque inposui longae velamina virgae / scilicet oblitos admonitura mei*' (And I placed my shining veil on a long branch to remind those who have forgotten me)(lines 41-2). Earlier, Ariadne had written of the sails: '*ut vidi haut dignam quae me vidisse putarem*' (As I looked upon a sight I thought I had not deserved to see)(line 31). Armstrong believes this is a reference to the black sails, which Theseus forgets to swap for white sails while heading home, and which led to his father's mistaken belief that Theseus had died.³²

³¹ Armstrong 2006: 231.

³² Verducci 1985: 261; Armstrong 2006: 231.

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