

Catullus 64 and the recycled *hamartia*: ll.132-153

On reading Catullus 64, one of the consistent features discussed in its critical commentary is its use of the tragic sensibility. Although strictly considered a mini-epic or epyllion, the extended monologue, the absence of substantial plotting and the intense focus on Ariadne's subjective psychological interiority are all hallmarks of drama and tragedy.¹ The epyllion's epic actually follows the general structure of an Attic tragedy with its expository prologue, *rhesis*, culminating tragic action and denouement in the form of the Bacchus' *deus ex machina*.² Catullus 64 also incorporates some of the more formal elements as set out by Aristotle in his *Poetics* as the unities of time, place and action at Dia's beach are observed by the ecphrasis' unbroken flow.³ Even the timing of Ariadne's lamenting speech closely follows that of Euripides' *Medea*. As Gail Trimble points out, 'the deferral of Ariadne's speech to the third scene of the inner story evokes those tragedies in which [...] [the protagonist's] actual entrance is considerably delayed, and makes a greater impact because of this.'⁴ In fact, Ariadne's plight as the tragically abandoned ingenue closely resembles the Medea retellings of Euripides, Ennius and Apollonius. Ariadne and Medea both represent the same tragic-mythic trope of the royal daughter that is enamoured with the impressive foreign sailor and aids him by betraying her family, only to in turn be betrayed by him with ruinous consequences for her.⁵ To this end we should also be mindful of Queen Dido from the *Aeneid* as she figuratively betrays her family by disregarding her dead husband's memory.

Yet the most intriguing and structurally important borrowing of Catullus 64 from Attic tragedy is *hamartia*. According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragedy required an individual of decent but imperfect virtue committing *hamartia*, being a mistake occasioned by human error. The term seems to be most relevant to discussion of the 5th century BCE plays of dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides,⁶ and as Erin Roberts details was an action 'stemming from good intentions but which nevertheless fail[s] to meet their intended goal' and as such are 'mistakes that do not result from any ill will or intentional deviation from a moral standard.'⁷ Aristotle provides greater clarity on *hamartia* in his *Nicomachean Ethics* where he suggests that *hamartia* is more serious than an accident in that 'the harm occurs contrary to reasonable expectation', but is less serious than a deliberate misdemeanour where 'the harm is inflicted as a result of decision'.⁸ As Nancy Sherman puts it, *hamartia* 'is a kind of culpable negligence' and 'a failure to take care, a reproachable ignorance'.⁹ Similarly Gerald Gresseth considers *hamartiai* as '[t]he more proper term for reprehensible acts, though not done by a person with a fixed disposition towards evil.'¹⁰ This essay will seek to consider if any aspect of Ariadne's behaviour can be labelled *hamartia* and if so what the narrative and hermeneutical implications of this on Catullus 64 are. The *Aeneid* is especially instructive here as Dido's abandonment episode has gifted us a Latin equivalent of *hamartia* with *culpa*. For this reason, we shall examine Dido's travails

¹ Zetzel, p.263

² Trimble, p.1

³ Trimble, p.11-12

⁴ Trimble, p.7

⁵ Trimble, p.8

⁶ Roberts, p.346

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Roberts, p.347

⁹ Sherman, p.186

¹⁰ Gresseth, p.317

first and then apply this Latinised *hamartia* back onto Catullus' Roman reworking of the Ariadne-Theseus myth.

Despite *hamartia* not being mentioned in the *Aeneid*, an equivalent term *culpa* can equally be applied to Dido's clandestine non-marital sexual encounter with Aeneas in the cave. As J. L. Moles points out, "*culpa*" is a suitable Latin equivalent for *hamartia* because *culpa* similarly conveys the notion of flawed judgement and decision making which can be distinguished from acts of intentional wickedness or criminality as implied by *scelus*.¹¹ *Culpa* like *hamartia* also suggests a weakness of will or resolve as found with Dido's first thought to submit to her transgressive desire for Aeneas: *huic uni forsan potui succumbere culpae* (4.19).¹² Dido's manifestation of her illicit inclinations in the form of a cave elopement with Aeneas is her *hamartia* and is referred to as *culpam* (4.172). As Moles explains, 'Quite clearly, [Dido's] *culpa* is her act in giving herself to Aeneas'.¹³ Dido herself, despite her protestations to the contrary, was keenly aware of her desire's culpability and the peep into her interior ruminations confirms the same: *furtivum amorem* (4.171). Dido's despondency on realising that she imprudently extra-maritally fornicated with Aeneas, *nunc te facta impia tangunt* (4.596), is especially illuminating as to why her liaison proved so self-destructive within her social context and its mores, customs and values. *Impia* means not only a general dereliction of one's sense of duty but here it more specifically implies three separate forms of social transgression: feminine immodesty, sacrilege and unpatriotism. These latter three aspects are the negative correspondents of what are commonly considered to be the three stands of *pietas* which Aeneas and Dido publicly present themselves as adhering to: a devotion to one's family, people and gods. Just as Dido's suicidal realisation that her acting upon her lust forsook *pietas*, which in turn made her life untenable in the face of Aeneas' subsequent abandonment, so too does Ariadne's *culpa* lead to similar disastrous consequences.

Although Ariadne in her monologue doesn't explicitly say *culpa*, she does tell Theseus that she 'chose rather to let go a brother than fail in the moment of crisis to help deceitful you' (ll.150-151).¹⁴ For in her choice we find *crevi*, an archaic term for *decrevi* from *decerno*, which carries the meaning to decide or determine.¹⁵ Although *crevi*, a somewhat loose semantic relative of *hamartia*, only possesses the sense of choice and not human error as *hamartia* does, this double sense is still holistically present in the context of her lament. Firstly, in *crevi* we have her choice. Then in Ariadne's scornful tone at being abandoned by Theseus, as seen with her anaphoric invective on his broken vows and dissembling, *periuria* (l.135 and l.148) and *perfide* (ll.132-33), we also infer her self-castigating understanding that she has made the wrong choice: the second and final error element of *hamartia*. As J. B. DeBrohun puts it, 'she identifies her brother's slaughter as the act that has separated her completely and irrevocably from her home and family', and 'recognises – unhappily – that she has made the wrong choice between Theseus and her brother'.¹⁶ It should be noted however that the suggestion that Ariadne disregarded notions of *pietas* may not be entirely as relevant as when made of Dido. The latter's fling with Aeneas breached all three aspects of *pietas* specific to her situation: the Carthaginian mores of feminine modesty, her self-imposed matrimonial mourning for Sychaeus and the standards expected of her as national figurehead. On the contrary, Ariadne did not betray her gods but did betray her family, Crete and her bestial Minotaur brother. Her use of *germanum* (l.150) especially emotionally charges the description of the latter as it is commonly an adjective used to describe full

¹¹ Moles, p.51

¹² Gildenhard, 2014

¹³ Moles, p.51

¹⁴ Quinn, 1970

¹⁵ Quinn, p.322

¹⁶ DeBrohun, 'Ariadne and the whirlwind of fate', p.421-422

siblings, which the Minotaur was not, but also carries connotations of true or real.¹⁷ The contrast evoked by the true-false antithesis of Theseus' callous falseness with *fallaci* (l.151) and the exaggerated emotional proximity and intimacy between Ariadne and her 'true' brother, as implied by *germanum*, reiterate the drastic consequences of Ariadne's culpability in not detecting Theseus' monstrous and cruel deception. As DeBrohun succinctly surmised, 'Ariadne has mixed up her monsters'.¹⁸

In Dido, we can see how the *Aeneid* incorporates the causality of Ariadne's naïve *culpa* into the queen of Carthage's character. Ariadne's dotish assumption that her aiding Theseus meant he would honour his subsequent tautologous marriage promises of *conubia laeta* and *optatos humenaeos* (l.141) is characteristic of a tragic ingenue. However, Vergil prevents Dido from reflecting on her ill-advised trusting by distorting Ariadne's naivety into the queen's penchant for self-deception. Despondent at Aeneas' flight, Dido self-deceptively figures her sexual elopement with him as a legal betrothal as a shield from critics of her *pudor*: *coniugium vocat; hoc praetexit nomine culpam* (4.172).¹⁹ It also seems that Ariadne assumed much the same in considering, as a consequence of their amorous relations, Theseus to be her de facto husband, her *coniunx* (l.123). Yet, by Dido deprioritising the preservation of her reputable chastity, *neque enim specie famave movetur* (4.170), she inevitably forgoes her perceived decency and is shamed. Although Dido, much like Ariadne, emotively asserts that marriage vows had been given by Aeneas via the cave intercourse: *per conubia nostra, per inceptos hymenaeos* (4.316), on closer examination we find Aeneas' denial that he did not offer marriage torches or entered into a matrimonial contract to contain a kernel of truth: *nec coniugis umquam praetendi taedas, aut haec in foedera veni* (4.348-9). As Caldwell explains, '[i]n denying that he has participated in a wedding ceremony or agreed to the union, Aeneas is in fact referring to the two chief requirements of declaring a marriage at Rome—one social and one legal—and claiming that he and Dido have fulfilled neither.'²⁰ Aeneas' emphasis on the absence of a public ceremony and wedding witnesses is quite the cogent point because these, as Caldwell further adds, 'were essential because Roman law held that consent, rather than ceremony or consummation, made a marriage valid'.²¹ In this regard, we observe Vergil's further borrowing from Catullus 64. Ariadne only has the wind to act as witness to Theseus' broken promises, *quae cuncta aerii discerpunt irrita venti* (l.142) and likewise Dido has only Aether to attest to what she believed to be Aeneas' forsaken vows, *consciis aether conubiis* (4.176-8). Vergil expands this idea of the tragic heroine only having nature as a witness by additionally providing her with Earth, nymphs, *pronuba Juno* (4.166) as the married woman that ushers the bride to the nuptial boudoir,²² and lightning as the ceremonial torches.²³ In this way, Vergil reworks the tragic trope of the naive ingenue who pitifully only has the deafness and dumbness of nature to attest to a relationship that was more fleeting than formal, and in so doing imbues Dido's plight with tragic self-delusional grandeur.

If Vergil heavily drew on Catullus' Ariadne in order to infuse the Dido episode with the tragic, then Catullus likewise intertextually drew on various Medea retellings, primarily those of Apollonius, Euripides and Ennius.²⁴ Medea is never explicitly mentioned in the epyllion but rather heavily alluded to by blatant reference to her homeland of Colchis (l.5) and the quest for the golden fleece, *auratam*

¹⁷ DeBrohun, 'Ariadne and the whirlwind of fate', p.423

¹⁸ DeBrohun, 'Ariadne and the whirlwind of fate', p.422

¹⁹ Moles, p.51

²⁰ Caldwell, p.432

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gildenhard, p.164

²³ Caldwell, p.424

²⁴ Trimble, p.3

pellem (l.5). It is this allusive method that enables Medea's *hamartia*, her helping an impressive sailor to kill her brother on condition of marriage, to be overlayed onto Ariadne's same *culpa* with the immediately obvious cosmetic difference being Jason's replacement with Theseus.²⁵ As such, Ariadne's complaint that Theseus has repaid her help with betrayal echoes Apollonius and Euripides. Her indignant claim that she saved him from death in a whirlwind, *certe ego te in medio uersantem turbine leti eripui* (l.149), resembles Medea's assertion that her saving of Jason is common knowledge amongst even his own sailors, 'ἔσωσά σ', ὡς ἴσασιν Ἑλλήνων ὅσοι ταύτ' οὖν συνεισέβησαν Ἀργῶιον σκάφος' (l.476-77).²⁶ In Dido, we see a similar nautical sentiment that she saved Aeneas and his fleet from drowning: *amissam classem, socios a morte reduxi* (4.375). As Rebecca Armstrong correctly puts it, 'in many ways, it seems that Ariadne is a Medea',²⁷ and to this it should be added that Dido is equally both. Moreover, we find further intertextual parallels in the tragic heroines' immediate situations, namely their homelessness. Ariadne's lament that she has nowhere to return to, least of all her father's house, *nam quo referam* (l.177) and *quemne ipsa reliqui respersum iuuenem fraterna caede secuta* (l.180-1), again follows Medea's similar grievance. In Euripides' version, Medea also asks after Jason's desertion where she can she now go and rules out her father's home: 'νῦν ποῖ τράπωμαι; πότ' εἰς πατὴρ δόμους, οὐκ οἶσ' ἀφικέμεν' (ll.502-3). Likewise in Ennius' version, Medea wonders the same: *quo nunc me uertam* and *domum paternamne* (ll.177-178).²⁸ Ariadne and Medea are further alike in their vengeful appeals as Zeus consents to Ariadne's appeal to the Eumenides to punish Theseus, *sed quali solam Theseus me mente reliquit, tali mente, deae, funestet seque suosque* (ll.200-1), and endorses Medea's vengeance vow, 'ὦ Ζεῦ Δίκη τε Ζηνὸς Ἡλίου τε φῶς, νῦν καλλίνικοι τῶν ἐμῶν ἐχθρῶν' (ll.764-5). It appears that the high degree of similarity between the Medea, Ariadne and Dido characters may be partly due to the intertextuality arising from an inherited literary canon, but also because they all represent different takes on the abandoned woman trope. This fundamental connectedness is seen in Apollonius' Medea telling Jason not confuse her with Ariadne: τὸν τε κλείουσ' Ἀριάδνης (3.1003).²⁹

However, where Catullus' Ariadne differs in her portrayal from Catullus' intertextual sources that have been discussed thus far is in the strength of her claim that Theseus was indebted to her. Ariadne, and as discussed above Dido, appear to have much weaker arguments than Medea. By way of contrast, let us begin with Medea. In the same way that Ariadne complains of Theseus' *periuria* (l.135 and l.148), Medea too complains of Jason's broken marital vows with the intertextual polyptoton of Apollonius' 'ὄρκιος' (l.4.95) and Euripides' 'ὄρκους' (l.21). Medea's protesting is such a consistent character feature that when Euripides' Medea criticises Jason's shabby treatment of her, 'οἷας ἀμοιβῆς ἐξ Ἰάσονος κυρεῖ' (l.23), Jason's duplicitous oath in the *Argonautica* immediately springs to mind: 'δαιμονίη, Ζεὺς αὐτὸς Ὀλύμπιος ὄρκιος ἔστω'.³⁰ Such is the strength of Medea's case that Jason's defences fall flat. In Euripides, he flimsily claims that Medea exaggerates the help she gave, 'ἐπειδὴ καὶ λίαν πυργῶς χάριν' (l.526), and that it was really Aphrodite, 'Κύπριν' (l.527), who compelled her to act. Similarly, in the *Argonautica* he ungratefully tells his wife she only saved him because she was felled by cruel love, 'σχέτλι' Ἔρως' (l.4.445). Yet where Medea's depiction differs from Ariadne, as we shall soon see, is in her treatment by Jason who is a much less impressive and compelling man than Theseus. Apollonius draws Jason as a perfidious rake for whom disparaging epithets like helpless,

²⁵ Debrohun, 'Catullan intertextuality', p.313

²⁶ Euripides and Mastronarde, 2013

²⁷ Armstrong, p.17

²⁸ Trimble, p.8

²⁹ Apollonius, Book 3, Line 1003

³⁰ Apollonius, Book 1, line 19

‘ἀμήχανος’,³¹ or terrified, ‘πεφοβημένος’ (l.4.149), are synonymously applied. With the knowledge that it was Medea’s magic that dispelled the dragons and earthmen that thwarted Jason, on hearing Jason’s base denial that she got more than was owed for saving him, ‘μείζω γε μέντοι τῆς ἐμῆς σωτηρίας εἴληφας ἢ δέδωκας’ (l.534-535), we experience Jason as a calumnious cad on account of what D. Mastronarde calls his self-serving ‘language of profit, economics and commerce’.³²

By contrast however, if Ariadne’s lament is less cogent and compelling than Medea’s it is because she appears to have contributed much less to Theseus’ triumphs than that given to Jason. As R. J. Claire explains, ‘Medea’s help is far more concrete than that of Ariadne’.³³ Whereas Medea gave Jason the benefit of her magic and potions, which proved directly instrumental, Ariadne only provides Theseus with yarn to allow him to escape the labyrinth after he has vanquished the minotaur: *errabunda regens tenui uestigia filo* (l.113). In light of this, Ariadne’s wail that she most certainly saved Theseus’ life, *certe ego te in medio uersantem turbine leti eripui* (l.149-50), seems at worst hysterically deluded and at best melodramatic. However, just because Theseus overcame her brother more or less singlehandedly, Ariadne is not wrong or any less entitled to her hope that he prove a man of his word. In her girlish attempt to censure Theseus’ reneging with a universal feminine backlash, she powerlessly states that women will no longer believe anything men say: *nunc iam nulla uiro iuranti femina credat, nulla uiri speret sermones esse fideles* (ll.143-44). Despite the repetitive contriteness of her synonyms of trust and speech, *credat* with *speret* and *iu*³⁴*rant*i and *sermones*, coupled with her *nulla* anaphora, her wounded innocence here actually makes Ariadne more relatable, her pain more palpable. Whereas Medea’s pain festers to become infanticidally murderous, Ariadne’s still lamentably gives way to adolescent reveries and longings of sexual subservience: *attamen in uestras potuisti ducere sedes, quae tibi iucundo famularer serua labore* (l.160-1). Although Ariadne presents a less persuasive picture of betrayal than Medea, principally because Theseus appears a much less straightforwardly reprehensible character when compared to Jason, the destruction of her sexual innocence still makes Theseus’ desertion of her tragically cruel.

However, there is a caveat here. Whilst Theseus fares better than Jason in terms of audience and reader reception, his depiction is not without irony.³⁵ On the one hand we are presented with a nostalgic paean to the Heroic Age’s prowess, *heroum mira uirtutes indicat arte* (l.51), yet on the other hand we witness Theseus’ cruelty in furtively abandoning a sleeping Ariadne: *eam deuinctam lumina somno liquerit immemori discedens pectore coniunx* (l.122-3). Some critics have downplayed Theseus’ own *culpa* here, such as Kinsey, who opined that it ‘might be said that he ought to have been kinder to one who saved his life, but can he be accused of being much more than *immemor*?’, and argued that it was debatable whether ‘under the circumstances [Theseus] can be blamed for not keeping his promise to Ariadne’. Yet in truth there is scant textual support for this position given how explicit the narratorial voice is in its condemnation of Theseus with its likening him to a forgetful husband.³⁶ Although it is arguable that Theseus’ abandonment merely mirrors Ariadne’s of her brother, his behaviour in and of itself still suggests, to quote Rebecca Armstrong, a ‘culpable, despicable disregard for the requirements of friendship’.³⁷ Quite simply Theseus appears, in large part due to Ariadne’s

³¹ Hadas, p.167

³² Euripides and Mastronarde, p.258

³³ Clare, p.71

³⁴ Armstrong, P.7

³⁵ Armstrong, P.10

³⁶ Armstrong, P.13

³⁷ Armstrong, P.7

stinging insulting epithets,³⁸ cruel. Herein lies the contradiction in Theseus' character. Although Theseus, who so often reminds of Aeneas,³⁹ is as D. P. Harmon describes him, 'the type of young man a Roman could understand: one who loves (after the gods) *pater* and *patria* above all',⁴⁰ his unquestioning adherence to the patriarchal philosophies of *pater* and *patria* over and above Ariadne's wellbeing implies that misogynistic cruelty, although an anachronism, is inbuilt into the heroic code.⁴¹ In this way the poem is in one sense somewhat of a re-examination on the masculinisation of heroism. In this way, the poem asks one to ponder on Theseus' callousness as to who is the real *saevum monstrum* (l.101). By the poem's end, it is clear that the narrator's opening laudatory invocation to bygone heroes was merely a literary deceit that sets up the reader for the heroic deconstruction to come: *o bona matrum progenies, salвете iterum vos ego saepe meo, vos carmine compellabo* (l.23-25). As Armstrong points out, this narratorial play' is just what an epyllion loves to do: tell a hero's story from an unheroic angle, and showcase the acts (and emotions) of a woman within the heroic world.⁴²

Yet many critics refute notions of Catullus using literary games or *lusus* to make wider comments on the questionable heroic values latent in the mythic canon. James H. Dee asserted that 'Catullus does not express any especially strong disapproval of the tales he elaborates in poem 64',⁴³ because 'Catullus, like other ancient authors, felt free to develop episodes from the myths without judging them'.⁴⁴ James Moorwood expanded on this and endorsed Richard Jenkyns' preference to read the poem as resisting attempts to find ethical uniformity because Catullus here 'is deliberately various, disproportionate and unpredictable'.⁴⁵ Jenkyns additionally argued that the work was just aesthetically 'made up of pictures in that it is a gallery of tableaux or set pieces' that each 'elicit a differing response'.⁴⁶ Considering the work's differing tones and genres, DeBrohun concludes that 'confusion' is 'the defining characteristic of the epyllion as a whole'.⁴⁷ Yet what these criticisms miss, possibly dizzied by the poem's shifts between tragic and jubilant marital tones, is that what glues these is the biting sardonic wit and irony that characterises much of Catullus' epigrams. Let us not forget that in Catullus 16, whilst the speaker shrugs off moral messaging in favour of wit, he wittily immediately undercuts this sententiae with the promotion of literary sensitivity, the very quality that renders tragic Ariadne's plight and enables a moral reflection on the heroic code's flaws: *nam castum esse decet pium poetam ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est, qui tum denique habent salem ac leporem, si sunt molliculi* (16.5-8). Catullus is more than capable of using humour and irony to shift genre gears. We observe this with the absurd black humour in the juxtaposition between the celebration of the nuptials of Thetis and Peleus and the subversive foretelling of the maternal woe occasioned by the grotesque bloodletting of Achilles whose birth is a product of the very wedding in question: *illius egregias virtutes claraque facta saepe fatebuntur gnatorum in funere matres* (l.348-9). The conspicuous reuse of *virtutes* here reiterates the point made so well by John Warden that 'a poet does not have to choose between being earnest and playful' and that literary games does not indicate 'a

³⁸ *perfide* – 'disloyal' (l.132-133), *crudelis mentis* – 'cruel-minded' (l.136) and *immite pectus* 'hard-hearted' (l.138)

³⁹ In particular his similar forgetting of Creusa in book 2 of the Aeneid and furtive departing from Dido.

⁴⁰ Harmon, p.319

⁴¹ Dee, p.103

⁴² Armstrong, p.3

⁴³ Dee, p.98

⁴⁴ Dee, p.107

⁴⁵ Moorwood, p.221

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ DeBrohun, 'Ariadne and the whirlwind of fate', p.419

lack of seriousness'.⁴⁸ As such, Catullus 64 exposes the feet of clay of the inherited Attic heroic cannon and refashions Ariadne's tragedy, itself drawing on the Medea myths, around an innovative motion and sound filled ecphrasis to probe the problematic nature of some of these recycled myths.

⁴⁸ P.412; CATULLUS 64: STRUCTURE AND MEANING

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