

Derrick Melan – Advanced Latin – Latin Epic – Catullus 64.80-93 Commentary

This passage of Catullus 64 takes place in the midst of a digression in his telling of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis and begins with the hero Theseus volunteering himself (*"ipse suum ... proicere optauit"*, notably as a willing participant as opposed to those chosen by lot) as a sacrifice to the Cretan Minotaur. The *"angusta...moenia"* which were afflicted by the sacrifices (*"quis...malis...uexarentur"*—"were being devastated by these evils), as well as the proverbial "dead men/women walking" of said narrow walls (*"funera...nec funera"* – lit. corpses but not [yet] corpses) paint a picture of the atmosphere of the city at the time. Of interesting side note is the use of *Cecropia*, -ae in the text as a form of referring to the acropolis of Athens, alluding to the mythical founder *Κέκροψ*, who is stated as naming the city after himself [Apollodorus, *Library*, 3.14] (He was also a snake-man, which is in no way relevant to the text but endlessly fascinating on a personal level). Catullus continues on Theseus in line 84 with *"naue leui...lenibus"*—the light ship moving lightly—evoking the Heroic image of a lone man on tiny skiff sailing towards his destiny, such as with Odysseus at the tail end of his own journey. Famously, Theseus' destiny lay in the house of King Minos; described by Catullus contradictorily with both *"magnanimum"*, suggesting a generous or noble spirit, as well as *"superbas"* which much more harshly implies arrogance and pride. It seems at first a little odd to use both words together, in a literary sense. However, when we consider that Catullus' point of focus in this digression is on Ariadne, rather than Theseus, the level of contradiction lessens greatly. From a Cretan perspective in general, and Ariadne's specifically, it is much more reasonable to see both regal arrogance and noble spirit as two halves of Minos (as contrasted by the pure tyranny that might be ascribed in the classically Athenian tradition, which we might expect in a text centered more around Theseus).

The next eight lines, 86-93, are all spent describing Ariadne at her first meeting with Theseus in the palace of Minos. Heavy in simile and metaphor, Catullus takes great pains to describe in almost

romantic fashion both the pure vibrant maidenhood of the *"uirgo regina"* as well as the depth of her sudden desire. He sets Ariadne up with the imagery of youthful purity: on chaste couch— *"castus... lectulus"*—and in her mother's gentle embrace, *"in molli complex matris"*. In lines 89-90, he further compares her in simile to the myrtle (a flowering shrub sacred to Venus [per Virgil, *Eclogue* VII.61-63] and known for its aromatic and medicinal properties, and for its striking white flowers) surrounded by both the "streams of the Eurotas" as well as multi-coloured spring wildflowers. Compare to the lyric poet Sappho: "...therein *cold water* babbles through *apple-branches*, and the whole place is *shadowed by roses*, and from the shimmering leaves the sleep of enchantment comes down; therein too *a meadow*, where ... *blossoms with spring flowers*, and the winds blow gently..." [Campbell, *David Greek Lyric Volume 1* p.56-7; emphasis mine]. We see in this passage similar imagery of water, flowering foliage, and wildflowers. Both poets are probably using this romantic pastoralism with the intent of invoking imagery of freshness and youth in Ariadne (her being in the "spring of youth" so to say). The use of *"Eurotae...flumina"* specifically is curious. Catullus clearly means to invoke a more specific image than just the use of *flumina* alone; but it is unclear how. Perhaps by linking to Ovid's descriptions of Helen who *"ab Eurota Phrygiis avecta carinis"* [Ovid, *Amores* 10.1]? Further than describing Ariadne's person, Catullus describes her reaction to seeing Theseus for the first time. Just as Medea "cast bright glances" at Jason, so too did Ariadne *"cupido conspexit lumine"*; as Medea's "destructive love...curled beneath her heart and burned in secret", Ariadne's *"cuncto concepit corpore flammam"* [Apollonius *Arg.* 3.275-98]. The comparisons are fair—both are tragic feminine figures and fill nearly the same roles in their respective mythos: both are immediately struck with love (though in Ariadne's case, Eros was unusually *not* involved), both betray their birth family for this new love, only to sooner (in Ariadne's case) or later (in Medea's) be betrayed and abandoned by this new love; and as a consequence putting in motion the eventual ruination of the unfaithful hero.