

Derrick Melan – Commentary on Catullus 64.154-85 (OCT Mynors) – word count: 3,457

The heart of Catullus' 64th poem lies to some extent in rejection, despite its surface-level theme of mythical matrimony. It is an example of epyllion, a tradition which rejects the normal composition of the Hellenic heroic epic and attempts to invert it, showing its subject to be in some way or another less than heroic; however, Catullus again attempts to invert the genre of inversion by taking the non-heroic subject (in this case that is, Ariadne) and putting her center stage. In a manner comparable to other treatments of classical women, in particular the figures of Medea (most notably of Euripides' and Ennius' *Medea*, though also to an extent the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius) and Dido (in parts of Vergil's *Aeneid*), Catullus takes great care in focusing the core of his piece on the figure of Ariadne and how she is affected by the deeply un-heroic actions done unto her. He does this through a lengthy ekphrasis, which per Laird can be considered the practice of literary description of a visual artistic piece. The technique can be an odd concept to wrap one's head around at first brush; it is much more reasonable to grasp the movement and emotion of a character within a moving work, such as a play or more traditional epic narrative such as the *Odyssey*, than it is to take a static image and ascribe those traits to it. No matter how eloquent, it will eternally be a mental stretch to use the "hang in there!" cat as basis for deep emotional investigation.

And yet, that is essentially what Catullus has done within his poem. The bulk of the work is comprised of this Ariadne ekphrasis, lasting in total 214 lines of the roughly 400 line work and is nested within the larger wedding-narrative of Peleus and Thetis, which appears to be a more traditional wedding poem along with the inclusion of some light retroactive foreshadowing to Achilles around lines 338-342. The ekphratic segment often jumps between flashbacks, flash-forwards, and the present; but, primarily centers around the mythical figure of Ariadne on Dia; and certainly relies heavily upon the earlier poetic traditions with which Catullus and his readers would have been familiar, particularly with regard to the texts previously mentioned. What is unusual, however, is that while most examples we have of ekphrasis are quite detailed, most do not have their subject speak directly, let alone at length as Ariadne does (Trimble 2009). Laird calls it a good example of a "disobedient ekphrasis", for how it flaunts the typically established rules that come with

the format. Laird further points out that direct speech is not to be found in the narration of any other ancient ekphrasis. As a reader going through the ekphrasis, it is vital to keep in mind that all of the movement and description is not actually happening; but is expounded upon based on a single static image on the purple coverlet within the framing narrative.

Catullus, after setting the scene of Ariadne *namque fluentisono prospectans litore Dia* (52-75), describes the events which brought Theseus to Crete – a senseless crime and its harsh punishment by a greater force – and takes pains to show Ariadne’s immediate infatuation with the dashing young Athenian before giving a brief recap of the traditional story between Theseus and the Minotaur (76-131). Beginning at line 132, we have a lengthy speech, or as Clare calls it a “lament”, from Ariadne where she directly addresses the winds and waves of her lonely island. Up through line 153, Ariadne is describing her role in Theseus’s heroic adventure, noting how he would likely have been rather unsuccessful without her assistance – *certe ego te...tempore dessem* (149-151). Lines 154-185, the primary excerpt which I will focus on, we can roughly divide into three parts: Ariadne criticizing Theseus in disbelief, by way of questioning his parentage (154-7), pleading around his apparent unwillingness to wed her (158-163), and the stirrings of her despair as she begins to take stock of her options (164-185). The lament then continues through line 205, which sees her in some way come to terms with her desperate situation, though not before invoking the Furies *funestet seque suosque* (201). Thereafter, we have a shift to Aegeus and the fulfillment to Ariadne’s curse (206-250) and the entrance of Bacchus (251-64).

Ariadne’s disbelief, both at her situation and at the pointedly unheroic actions of the supposed Greek hero Theseus, is an early theme in her section of the poem: *necdum etiam sese quae visit visere credit* (55) and underlies the tone of the rest of her lament. She directs much of her vitriol at Theseus directly, using the vocative and 2nd person forms in her addresses (*Theseu, te, tibi*), which sets up the linguistic break later at line 164 and provides the root of some of its irony. In particular at lines 154-7 where, perhaps sarcastically or even per Syndikus as a quiet disbelieving aside to herself, Ariadne asks:

*quenam te genuit sola sub rupe leaena?
quod mare conceptum spumantibus expuit undis,*

*quae Syrthis, quae Scylla rapax, quae uesta Charybdis,
talìa qui reddis pro duli praemia uita?*

She is asking herself what kind of animal, what kind of monster had to have borne Theseus for him to act so unjustly. Dido echoes this sentiment almost exactly in Book 4 of the Aeneid (4.365–7), where she criticizes Aeneas' supposed noble parentage and upbringing:

*nec tibi diua parens generis nec Dardanus auctor,
perfide, sed duris genuit te cautibus horrens
Caucasus Hyrcanaeque admorunt ubera tigres.*

She calls that Aeneas cannot have either divine or noble (Dardanus here referring to a demi-god founder of a city on Crete at the foot of Mount Ida – Ariadne also makes reference to the mountain with *Idaeosne*, though it is unclear if there is meant to be any particular parallel here) parentage, but that he must have been born from a pointedly ignoble beast. Interesting here is the use of *Hyrcanae...tigres*, as a callback to *leaeana*; which itself can be compared to Euripides' *Medea* 1342–43 (where Jason uses *λέαιναν...Σκύλλης* to refer to Medea) and 1358–59 (where the words are echoed, almost proudly, by Medea back at Jason) (DeBrohun 1999). Notably, Ariadne does not invoke just any of the myriad Grecian monsters, but three of the more famous sea-terrors: the Syrtes, Scylla, and Charybdis. See also Aeneid 4.32–43 (emphasis mine):

*Id cinerem aut Manis credis curare sepultos?
Esto: aegram nulli quondam flexere mariti,
non Libyae, non ante Tyro; despectus Iarbas
ductoresque alii, quos Africa terra triumphis
dives alit: placitone etiam pugnabis amori?
Nec venit in mentem, quorum consederis arvis?
Hinc Gaetulae urbes, genus insuperabile bello,
et Numidae infreni cingunt et **inhospita Syrthis**;
hinc deserta siti regio, lateque furentes Barcae.*

The Syrtes (major and minor) were two gulfs on the North African coast around modern day Libya and Tunisia; known for their harsh tides and sandbars – personified as monsters, as was common. Scylla and Charybdis are the more famous of the trio, also appearing in the *Aeneid*, as well as both the *Odyssey* and *Argonautica*. The two monsters supposedly stood counterpart to the other in the modern Strait of Messina between Sicily and Italy proper. Nappa states: “The accusation that an unfeeling or cruel person was born of inhuman parents in a desolate wasteland [nb. Dido’s *Caucasus*, Jason’s *Τυρσηνίδος*, both modifying the beasts they are discussing; Ariadne does not appear to specify such a location, although she does imply the sea as a whole based on her choice of insults] goes back to Homer and occurs in Greek tragedy and Hellenistic poetry before Catullus, who uses it twice” (referring to Catullus 60: *Num te leaena...aut Scylla latrans infimainguinum parte...*). The unflattering comparison that Ariadne is clearly trying to make here is that Theseus has certain predatory qualities, with Scylla known for snatching the unwilling to their deaths or Charybdis devouring the unfortunate, or, most appropriately, of the Syrtes stranding sailors. In all cases, these are deeply unheroic traits which fits in with the tone of an epyllion. Phonetically, these lines stand out as being prolific with onomatopoeia: the repeating soft ‘s’ contrasted with the hard ‘k’ or ‘ch’ (*quod...spumantibus expuit undis, quae Syrtis, quae Scylla rapax, quae...Charybdis*) gives the auditory impression of harsh waves when spoken aloud; particularly if spoken at volume as Ariadne may be doing.

The next section, lines 158-163, have Ariadne almost attempting to bargain with Theseus:

*Si tibi non cordi fuerant conubia nostra,
Saeva quod horrebas prisci praecepta parentis,
At tamen in uostras potuisti ducere sedes,
Quae tibi iucundo famularer serua labore,
Candida permulcens liquidis uestigia lymphis
Purpureae tuum consternens ueste cubile.*

She suggests that Theseus' *prisci...parentis* – “old-fashioned father”, meaning Aegeus – may be the reason which he acted in the way that he did; almost as if attempting to retroactively justify his actions to some small extent, “though the rather derogatory image of *horrebas* suggests this is ironic.” (Trimble 2010) There is also the play between *nostra* and *uostras*: she criticizes Theseus (*si tibi... nostra*, she is still addressing him directly at this point) that “our marriage” would not have been welcome in “your [that is, Theseus and his “old-fashioned father’s] home.” She then attempts to bargain with him, that if she could not be his wife, then at least she could serve him. This feels a bit like a debasement, like Ariadne is willing to lower herself just to stay with Theseus, and there is definitely a sense of sexuality to the sentiment; that she would “serve” him not only in day-to-day aspects, but also in the bedroom. There are some literary parallels to this idea: Helen in the *Illiad* (3.409) and in fragments of Euripides’ *Andromeda* (fr. 129a); though Trimble states that “it is only *after* Catullus that we see signs of the offer of slavery becoming a commonplace for desperate women addressing their lovers.” However, unlike in much of the rest of her words, there is an argument for Ariadne’s tone here to be far less severe than in other portions (such as around 154-8 immediately preceding) as the nature of the tasks she has laid out are not particularly burdensome ones, and may even be a brief foray by Ariadne into fantasy in the middle of her larger lament. She speaks of serving as *iucundo...labore*, or a pleasant labor; of washing Theseus’ feet and spreading – *consternens* – his bed with a purple coverlet. There can certainly be some doubt in the reader that Ariadne, given her noble upbringing, is much aware of the realities that come with servanthood or slavery. The inclusion of *purpureae...ueste* also serves to remind the reader of the Peleus and Thetis narrative from the beginning of the poem (49-50: *purpura fuco... haec uestis*), drawing them out of the ekphrasis. “The sudden reminder of Ariadne’s ekphrastic status draws attention, in the middle of the speech, to the paradox that it is uttered by a depicted figure” which also narratively seems to almost draw her out of her own reverie (Trimble 2010).

Ariadne brings herself back to her present with *sed quid ego* (164), echoing the way that the poet interrupts himself at 116:

*sed quid ego ignaris nequiquam conquerar auris,
externata malo, quae nullis sensibus auctae*

*nec missas audire queunt nec reddere uoces?
ille autem prope iam mediis uersatur in undis,
nec quisquam apparet uacua mortalis in alga.
sic nimis insultans extremo tempore saeua
fors etiam nostris inuidit questibus auris.*

Ariadne here is vocalizing that her lament is ultimately, pointless. The repeated negative language (*nequiquam...nullis...nec...nec...nec...nimis*) sharpens her cries and further underwrites the isolation which she is experiencing. Dido has a similar moment in the *Aeneid*: *quid loquor? aut ubi sum? quae mentem insania mutat?* (4.595). It is a common trope in classical tragedy for a lament to the natural environment surrounding a person, and here Catullus is almost calling that particular trope out through Ariadne (Lowrie 2009). She questions, and rejects, how the elements could be able to listen or reply (*nec missas audire...nec reddere voces*), states that Theseus is too far away (*ille...mediis...undis* – note that she specifically refers to “that man” instead of Theseus by name, perhaps with more than a little venom implied into her voice), and that there is no other human around (*nec quisquam*). There is also a potential pun in the form of *auris...auris* (164, 170), the former referring to winds and the latter to ears but in this context may further the idea of the “senseless winds”, as “the *aurae* have no *auris*” (Trimble 2010). While, as mentioned previously, it is common for tragic laments to be given to the “senseless” elements around them it seems a little odd in context. Greek (and by extension Roman) myth quite frequently personifies the wind, one notable example being Aeolus of the *Odyssey* (10.1-12) and *Aeneid* (1.50-8). Trimble also notes that “The astute or return reader would know that Bacchus is waiting on the wings, ironically giving Ariadne’s audience-less lament an audience in fact, though Ariadne herself will not be aware of the fact for some several dozen lines (with Bacchus entering around line 251). This lack of (apparent) audience, however, is immediately contrasted as Ariadne nonetheless appeals to two divine powers: Jupiter (171), and later the Furies (192):

*Iuppiter omnipotens, utinam ne tempore primo
Cnosia Cecropiae tetigissent litora puppes,
indomito nec dira ferens stipendia tauro
perfidus in Cretam religasset nauita funem,*

*nec malus hic celans dulci crudelia forma
consilia in nostris requiesset sedibus hospes!*

She first invokes Jupiter to say “*utinam ne tempore primo Gnosia Cecropiae tetigissent litora puppes*”. Her wish echoes the opening of *Medea*: “Would that the Argo had never winged its way to the land of Colchis...” (1). She calls Theseus *perfidus* – “faithless” – and *malus* – “wicked man” or colloquially “this bastard” (Trimble 2010 ad loc) – which again finds parallels in Medea’s frequent calling of Jason *κακός*, or even how he remarks *λέγους’ Ἰάσον’ ὥς κάκιστός ἐστ’ ἀνὴρ* (452) and Dido’s similar use of *perfidus* as a nominative (4.421). We also see the continued use of *Cecropia* to refer to the Athenians alluding to the mythical serpentine founder *Κέκροψ*, who is stated as naming the city after himself (Apollodorus, *Library*, 3.14), as well as *Gnosia*, pertaining to Knossos, the capital of Crete. Poetically, this refers to the entire island (much like using Westminster to refer to the UK on a political level), but there are also shades of it referring specifically to the palace of Minos – famously ascribed to the city of Knossos – as not only did Ariadne’s downfall begin with Theseus coming to Crete generally, but her home in Minos’ palace especially. Also unusual is the phrase *in Creta(m) religasset*: the Mynors text takes *in Cretam* (accusative) though the Loeb 1976 ed. differs with *in Creta* (ablative). Either choice significantly colours the following form of *religo*. The ablative appears to be the preferred choice, as typically *religo* is understood to mean “moored” or “fastened”; however, the accusative would create a much less common situation of the word meaning closer to the opposite “cast off”, which Catullus does make use of (*Cybelle religatque*, 63.84) – though this appears to be a rare example and the former reading is typically preferred (Fordyce 1961).

Ariadne then begins to ask a series of increasingly despairing questions of the winds and waves around her (as again, she is at this time unaware of any audience and she has abandoned any idea of speaking to Theseus directly). This self-reflection bears the hallmarks of what Fowler calls the “desperation speech”, citing a long history of examples in Greek and Roman tradition in which various possibilities for action are suggested and rejected:

*nam quo me referam? quali spe perdita nitor?
Idaeosne petam montes? at gurgite lato
discernens ponti truculentum diuidit aequor.*

*an patris auxilium sperem? quemne ipsa reliqui
respersum iuuenem fraterna caede secuta?
coniugis an fido consoler memet amore?
quine fugit lentos incuruans gurgite remos?
praeterea nullo colitur sola insula tecto,
nec patet egressus pelagi cingentibus undis.*

She begins with the pair of questions at line 177 which set up the rest of the section: “*nam quo me referam? Quali spe perdita nitor?*” (compare to Ennius: *domum paternamne? ane ad Peliae filias?*, quoted in Cicero’s *De oratore* 3.217) then immediately offers up three potential answers to her own questions as three binary questions in the deliberative subjunctive (*Idaeosne...*, *an patris...*, *coniugis an...* 178-83). A brief digression, *Idaeosne* is commonly translated as Mount Ida, the largest mountain on Crete (and one of the mythical locations which may have housed Zeus, or *Iuppiter omnipotens*, while in hiding from Kronos as an infant); but my personal copy of the Loeb translation instead has *Idoneosne* and translates the word as “the mountains of Sidon”, likely by way of attaching the enclitic question *-ne* to a corruption of *Sidoneos*; though there appears to be no strong evidence to support this. While both locations would have been well known and important in Catullus’ time, in this context the common translation seems much more likely. Thematically, looking to hide from her father and husband in a cave on a mountain mythically famous for hiding a god fits better than the mountains around an old Phoenician port town; though admittedly there is a somewhat timeless quality to the idea of running away from one’s family to a distant city. She rejects the idea of seeking refuge in the mountains (or city) due to the *gurgite lato* – likely the locative ablative of *gurgis latus*, implying that not only is the “gulf” (or more poetic “raging abyss”) wide, but encompassing. She suggests and rejects the idea of returning to her father (*an patris... caede secuta*), seemingly placing her “crime” of *ipsa reliqui...respersum iuuenem fraterna caede secuta* as being as bad as the death of her brother. She also rejects the husband she just mentioned *quine fugit* – acknowledging that Theseus is truly too far away to hear her. It is also of note that her father and would-be husband are both traditional protectors for Hellenistic women (and occasionally, dependent men); leaving her in the unenviable place of having no protectors. (Trimble 2010) Ariadne, having taken stock of her options and rejected each idea in turn as non-viable (fulfilling that

component of the desperation speech theme), concludes that her situation is hopeless and her death certain. At this point, as far as she knows, “not only has Theseus treated her shamefully, broken the sacred bonds of trust, and left her without her family or any friends, but he has effectively caused her death.” (Armstrong 2006)

It is not altogether surprising, I believe, that the steps which Ariadne goes through in her lament appear to follow rather closely to the supposed five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Pastan 1978). Catullus describes the image of Ariadne on the shore at the very beginning of the ekphrasis to be in disbelief: *necdum etiam sese quae visit visere credit* (55). She displays great anger: *iam iam nulla uiro iuranti femina credat* (143). She then bargains, offering servitude as opposed to marriage, and wishing that he had never come to Crete: *si tibi non cordi fuerant conubia nostra* (158), *utinam ne...puppis* (171-2). Taking stock of her situation, she can certainly be read as becoming increasingly depressed as she realizes that he has nowhere to go: *nam quo referam* (177). And finally, she accepts her fate – though importantly this is in direct contrast to Dido (who commits suicide – 4.664-8) or Medea (who commits several murders and is exiled – 1405-20); she ultimately has an escape and (presumably) a happy ending while her contemporaries very much do not. As we follow Ariadne on this journey of emotions, we have a character who is inanimate on several levels: she is classically an un-living mythic figure, and in this particular context a depiction on a physical, un-living object (and one could possibly also consider in a metaphorical sense, as she spends much of her lament paralyzed to an extent with disbelief and doubt). Yet, in spite of her inanimate status, Catullus has crafted a rather effective facsimile of life into this purple coverlet he spends so many words describing. It is a Galatea, a work of art which comes to life with its emotion and movement. Catullus, as mentioned previously, is uncommon in his ekphrastic dialogue but he uses it to great extent. Ariadne’s verbosity rivals that of her parallels, even though they are expected to have the form and movement associated with their genres as much as she is not. The depth of this poem certainly relies on its intertextuality; having built upon the Hellenic traditions before it and subsequently inspiring later poetic works in turn. Armstrong calls it “a poem which does not hesitate to ask questions and expose problems”, and I believe that can very much be agreed upon.

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