

## CASA ESSAY

The essay competition is sponsored by the *Classical Association of South Africa*. This paper was judged to be the best student essay submitted to *CASA* for 2018.

### **THE HEART OF THE POET AT THE HEART OF HIS POEM: THE MANNER AND PURPOSE OF CATULLUS' IDENTIFICATION WITH ARIADNE IN POEM 64**

*Deborah Stein, Honours in Ancient Languages (Stellenbosch University)*

#### *1. Introduction*

In recent times, the longer poems of Catullus have been receiving renewed attention. Previously regarded as highly technical, impersonal works written to earn the poet the epithet of *doctus* in neoteric circles, there is now a greater tendency to see them as personal expressions of the Catullan persona<sup>1</sup> in much the same way as it is accepted that his shorter, lyric poems do (Putnam 1961:165). In Poem 64, written in epic meter and dealing with epic heroes and their deeds, Catullus embeds deeply lyrical concerns relating to love, betrayal and grief at the very heart of his epyllion (Konstan 1993:71).

The epyllion is a mini-epic that is crafted with skill, loaded with learned allusions, and often intended to provide ironic commentary on the contemporary socio-political context by referencing the mythical heroes, heroic deeds and storylines of a bygone age (Johnson 2007:182). However, it does this in a new way — in the instance of Poem 64, by focusing on the ‘unepic’ theme of risky love, giving voice to the inner torment of a heroine, often as critique of the brave deeds of the hero (Gaisser 2009:151).

At the core of Poem 64, which ostensibly concerns the marriage of divine sea nymph Thetis and the mortal hero Peleus, one of the Argonauts, and slayer of the Minotaur, Catullus embroiders in an ekphrasis a tragic tale of unrequited love, bitter betrayal and grief. The intrusion of the personal, lyric themes of love (*amor*),

---

<sup>1</sup> Gaisser (2009:1) asserts that the Catullus we encounter in the poems is a persona crafted by the poet, and is not to be confused with the historical person of Catullus. Furthermore, she says that the persona is a fiction — a construct or literary mask created by the poet in his work (Gaisser 2009:45). We are not supposed to identify the historical Catullus with the Catullus that emerges from his poems. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to ‘Catullus’ rather than ‘the Catullan persona’ in this essay. I would like to add, though, that it is my own opinion that the poet and his persona cannot be utterly separate and unrelated in their thoughts and concerns and outlook: the one is, after all, the genesis of the other. But that is for another essay.

loss and betrayal into an epic genre concerned with the public values of heroic virtue, faith and dutiful loyalty (*virtus, fides, pietas*) and other values that constituted *Romanitas* — the essence of being Roman (Braund 2002:71) — is not simply a masterful display of poetic skill, a highly crafted rhetorical flourish, but is indeed a profoundly personal revelation of Catullus' private pain and anguish at his failed love relationship with Lesbia (Putnam 1961:166).

Furthermore, the very act of making this private world of the deserted lover public is a deliberate questioning and subversion of the public values of Rome and the ideals of Roman masculinity by Catullus — a Roman man on the margins of the socio-political elite, and in the shadow of the love of his life's many 'backstreet' dalliances (de Villiers 2016:4).

It is well accepted that Catullus identifies himself closely with Ariadne in his epyllion — when she speaks, it is the poet putting his words into the mouth of the central character in his poem. (Putnam 1961:167; Konstan 1993:70;<sup>2</sup> Ferguson 1985:198; Daniels 1967:352) But how is he identifying with the character of Ariadne, and most importantly, what is he wanting to accomplish through this? Through the surprising twists and turns of old stories made new through the stylus of the poet, Catullus turns things upside down.

Things are not what they seem in Poem 64: the words of a deserted lover, suffering alone and spoken in private, are broadcast in public — firstly to the Furies and to Jupiter in the poem, and secondly to the readers / hearers of the poem; a peripheral matter becomes central as the ekphrasis steps into the spotlight and turns the apparent topic of Thetis and Peleus into a frame for a different story — though there is still a thematic connection between the two (Konstan 1993:67); and the sword the hero wields in acts of epic *virtus* is shown in a morally dubious light (Ancona 2008:132), and is exchanged for the stylus in the hand of lyric poet, by which the socio-political order is subverted because its words do things as surely as deeds do (Ancona 2008:134). The private lament and curse of a lovelorn and betrayed Ariadne is approved by Jupiter and acted upon: the house of a man renowned for public displays of courage, character and moral excellence (*virtus*), yet whom is called in private faithless, heedless and cruel (*perfide, immemor, immite*), is decisively bought to ruin as a son loses his father and their father-son relationship. This relationship was regarded as the wellspring of all traditional

---

<sup>2</sup> While Konstan (1993:71) notes that there is identification between Catullus and Ariadne, and that there are parallels between Ariadne's lament about Theseus and Catullus' lyrics regarding Lesbia, he points to the dissimilarities between the causes of the break in relationship between the two couples: Theseus' neglect of Ariadne is not adulterous — it seems that Athens is just more 'dear to Theseus', while Lesbia's 'inconstancy is libidinous' in that she wants the passing thrill of erotic love rather than the constant and permanent love associated with marriage.

Roman values, amongst which moral excellence, loyalty and faith / faithfulness (*virtus, pietas, fides*) are core (Braund 2002:84).

Ariadne's words:

*sed quali solam Theseus me mente reliquit,  
tali mente, deae, funestet seque suosque.*

But with such a mind as Theseus deserted me, alone,  
O goddesses, let that same mind bring doom upon himself and his  
family. (64.201-202)<sup>3</sup>

Do this work:

*sic funesta domus ingressus tecta paterna  
morte ferox Theseus, qualem Minoidi luctum  
obtulerat mente immemori, talem ipse recepit.*

And so, as fierce Theseus entered his father's home, doomed  
with death, he himself received the same grief that he had  
inflicted on Minos' daughter with his unmindful mind. (64.246-248)

It is certain then, that the first and most obvious level of Catullus' identification with Ariadne is that of the lover who has given heart and soul to another, in expectation of marriage and family within the confines of a mutual covenant (*foedus*) of eternal love (*cf.* 64.140-142 and 109.5-6) — only to be virtually annihilated by betrayal at the hands of the other — at Lebia's hands in the case of Catullus (Braund 2002:143). This betrayal is all the more vicious in its careless discarding of the love relationship, and the character of *immemor* Theseus who so heedlessly sails away from Ariadne reminds us of Lesbia's casual disregard of the flower of Catullus' affection in Poem 11:

*nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem,  
qui illius culpa cecidit velut prati  
ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam  
tactus aratro est.*

Nor let her look back for my love, as before,  
which she has caused to fall, like a flower  
at the furthest edge of the field is  
casually killed by a passing plough. (11.21-24)

---

<sup>3</sup> The English translations throughout this essay are my own.

There is another level at which identity is engaged in Poem 64. This is not simply about the individual in relation to a lover, but about who the individual is in relation to his public, male, Roman identity. The masculine Catullus aligns himself with the feminine victim of love; the poet uses his public words to showcase a private world of love and betrayal through the private grief of a heroine whose private curse has public consequences (Gaisser 2009:155); the poet disrupts the conventional Roman values and morality reflected in the epic genre, with the lyric concerns of love and loyalty (Konstan 1993:71); the poet wields his stylus against the hero's sword in a fight to settle who the true hero is. This level of identification is tightly woven into the ekphrasis of Poem 64 through intertextual allusions to other poems in the Catullan corpus, such as Poems 11, 30, 109 and 70.

This essay will explore how Catullus' identification with Ariadne engages all these concerns, and will posit that his purpose with this is to challenge the reader / audience of Poem 64 to reconsider the values at the very heart of Roman society in a new light, and to consider a reordering of those values. This essay will do so chiefly by examining the ekphrasis, with special attention to Ariadne's lament and her curse of Theseus.

Just as Ariadne's curse works — her words have power to change the fabric of society (Braund 2002:86; Ancona 2008:134) — so do Catullus' words work. Marginal Catullus, (de Villiers 2016:37), speaking through a woman, wields his stylus to thrust right at the heart of what it means to be a Roman man, and in so doing, starts to shape a new centre that will become a wellspring for many after him — including Virgil, who wrote the definitive Roman epic, which also challenges what it means to be a Roman, and at what cost, through another woman, queen Dido, in Book 4 of the *Aeneid* (Konstan 1993:76).

Catullus harnesses all the tools at his disposal to do this (Johnson 2007:187, Gaisser 2009:116-117). From structure, to imagery, from literary device (e.g. ekphrasis) to intertextuality (allusions to the story and character of Medea,<sup>4</sup> as well as other Catullus poems), all the way to weaving lyric themes into the heart of an epic genre, employing the topics, forms and conventions of many poets before him (Gaisser 2009:150-151), Catullus takes the tools of his trade to fashion a new thing, to say a new thing in new way, for the audience who is willing to listen.

---

<sup>4</sup> According to Gaisser (2009:151), the most important intertextual thread is the story of Medea, with Catullus alluding to multiple presentations of the story, from Appollonius to Ennius: 'The story is used in both the frame and the ekphrasis, but it appears most prominent in the ekphrasis, where Medea appears almost as an alter ego of Ariadne'.

2. *The structure of Poem 64: Art that reveals the heart*

Traill (1988:365) asserts that Catullus commonly uses ring composition as a structural device, citing scholarly agreement that Poems 63, 64 and 68b are all written in ring composition — although there may be differences as to the exact arrangement of the sections.

In Traill's (1988:367) arrangement of Poem 64, the central section is comprised of lines 202-211: Jupiter's fulfilment of Ariadne's curse — directly resulting in Theseus forgetting his father's instructions. This is flanked on either side by Ariadne's set speech to Theseus (124-201) and Aegeus's set speech to Theseus (212-237).

Ferguson (1985:193) arranges the ring composition differently. He divides the poem into three symmetrical units, which are in turn tripartite — the key idea being at the centre. The first unit comprises the Introduction (1-30), the second unit, describing the arrival and departure of the human wedding guests (31-277), and third unit, covering the arrival and absence today of divine wedding guests (278-408), are grouped under the heading of The Wedding.

The second unit is at the structural heart of the composition, and at the core of this unit is the coverlet (50-266), featuring the story of Ariadne's desertion by Theseus. Furthermore, at the heart of these lines describing the visual depiction of Ariadne's abandonment, a mute figure embroidered, yet described as a statue, is her lament in lines 132-201.

Apart from the magnificent interweaving of poetic technique and layers of action and tension between dynamic and static, and poetry and art, of narrative and speech, and lyric and epic (Gaisser 2009:151), the structure of the poem demonstrates, according to Ferguson (1985:193) that the apparent digression of the ekphrasis is of central importance to Catullus, giving rise to the idea that the rest of the poem describing the marriage of Thetis and Peleus is a framework for the event depicted in the ekphrasis, and Ariadne's lament. He arranges the composition of the coverlet unit like this:

Coverlet 50-1

Ariadne on shore, Theseus disappears 52-75

Theseus arrives in Crete 76-115

Theseus and Ariadne to Dia 116-123

Ariadne alone 124-131

**Ariadne's lament 132-201**

Ariadne alone 202-206

Theseus (but not Ariadne) from Dia 207-211

Theseus leaves Athens 212-248

Ariadne on shore, Dionysus appears 249-264

Coverlet 265-266 (Ferguson 1985:194)

From the way Catullus has structured his poem, it appears that he is placing emphasis on the abandonment of Ariadne by Theseus, and most particularly on her lament. It seems that the poet is indicating with his structure that at the centre of the ekphrasis is the nexus where we can pick up the thematic threads of the poem, where our footsteps may be guided by the slender thread (*tenui filo*) of Ariadne's story to see (and hear) what the poet is trying to convey. Perhaps here is a way out of Poem 64's labyrinth of meaning (Gaisser 1995:580), where, like Theseus with Ariadne's help (lines 114-115), we might negotiate the bends of his multifaceted and criss-cross work and not be tripped up by blindly wandering down the wrong path (*inobservabilis error*).

3. *Ekphrasis: words about a picture (and a picture that speaks words)*

The story-within-a-story is a device common to the epyllion (Gaisser 2009:151). In Poem 64, the central story is presented in an ekphrasis — a description of the scenes embroidered on a coverlet on a marriage bed:

*haec vestis priscis hominum variata figuris  
heroum mira virtutes indicat arte.*

This coverlet, decorated with the figures of men of bygone times,  
showed with admirable skill the brave deeds of heroes. (64. 51-52)

The ekphrastic description is a standard feature of epic poetry, a rhetorical flourish intended to display the skill and learnedness of the poet (Konstan 1993:64). Gaisser (1995:588), referencing Goldhill, observes however that the neoteric poets used ekphrasis as a device to convey layers of meaning, and multiple (often contradictory) perspectives, and to show the 'variegated nature of reality as perceived by Hellenistic poets'.

Even given that the neoterics put ekphraseis to new use, the ekphrasis at the heart of Poem 64 is unusual for a number of reasons. For one thing, Catullus' description / narration of the events depicted on the coverlet takes up 214 lines of 408 lines — surpassing even the ekphrasis in Hesiod's *The shield of Heracles*, which is already remarkable for its length (Konstan 1993:64). This serves to make the story of Ariadne a dominant element in the poem, and therefore the story that assumes central importance — despite Poem 64 being ostensibly a marriage song for Thetis and Peleus (Konstan 1993:64). In addition, Laird (1993:19) points to Catullus' ekphrasis being 'disobedient': 'It breaks free from the discipline of the imagined object and offers less opportunity for it to be consistently visualized or translated adequately into an actual work of visual art'.

Features commonly absent in ekphraseis, such as direct speech, temporal shifts, sound and movement are foregrounded in Poem 64 (Laird 1993:20). Ariadne's lament and Aegeus' words take up about 90 lines between them. Almost half the description of a work of visual art is given over to direct speech, with Aegeus not even depicted on the coverlet. With these characters speaking from within a work of visual art (one of them off-stage, as it were) Catullus has done an entirely new thing — and this is the only instance of this occurring in classical literature (Laird 1993:20). The ekphrasis is also problematized with temporal shifts between the narrative scenes, as the narrator weaves the story together with episodes from the past, present, and future, which together all present to the viewer/reader's eye/ear the story of Theseus, Ariadne and the working out of her curse with the tragic death of Aegeus (Konstan 1993:64). Words and phrases such as *fluentisono* (53), *clarisonas voces* (126), and *raucisonos bombos* (264) add a wonderful sonic dimension to the ekphrasis, while images such as *magnis curarum fluctuat undis* (63) and *indomitus turbo contorquens flamine* (108) create a vivid sense of movement in what is supposed to be a static image. The words that suggest sound and movement come together in a startling way in the final part of the ekphrasis — creating a frantic dissonance in the lines describing the arrival of Bacchus and his initiates (Laird 1993:21):

*quae tum alacres passim lymphata mente furebant  
 euhoe bacchantes, euhoe capita inflectentes.  
 harum pars tecta quatiebant cuspide thyrsos,  
 pars e divolso iactabant membra iuvenco,  
 pars sese tortis serpentibus incingebant,  
 pars obscura cavis celebrabant orgia cistis,  
 orgia quae frustra cupiunt audire profani;  
 plangebant aliae proceris tympana palmis,  
 aut tereti tenuis tinnitus aere ciebant;  
 multis raucisonos efflabant cornua bombos  
 barbaraque horribili stridebat tibia cantu.*

Then the excited Bacchantes, with frantic minds, were raving helter-skelter, contorting their heads, crying 'Euhoe! Euhoe!'  
 Some of them wielded shafts with concealed tips,  
 some hurled about limbs torn from young bulls,  
 some were girding themselves with writhing snakes,  
 while some performed secret orgiastic rites with hollow caskets —  
 rites which the uninitiated long to hear, in vain.  
 Others were beating drums with palms lifted high,

or exciting shrill-pitched ringing from brass cymbals.  
 Horns from many were bellowing harsh blasts  
 and the untamed flute shrieked with spine-chilling song (64.254-264)

None of these features is able to be captured on an actual tapestry (Laird 1993:20), they defy the conventions of their own art and in so doing Catullus is showing us something new so that he can say something new. The overall effect is that the poet arrests our attention and causes us to ask: What is Catullus doing? What is he saying? Who is he saying it to?

Gaisser (2009:160) argues that the ekphrasis in Poem 64 communicates two different messages to two different audiences. She points out that unlike the usual ekphrasis, which makes frequent and clear references to the physical artefact throughout the description, Catullus' ekphrasis only refers explicitly to the embroidered scenes on the coverlet three times (Gaisser 2009:155). Two of these references bookend the description (lines 50-51 at the start and lines 266-267 at the end), and the third reference (line 251) serves to locate the scene with Bacchus on the coverlet and in relation to the scene with the abandoned Ariadne watching Theseus depart (Gaisser 2009:155).

There are only two scenes embroidered on the coverlet — that of Ariadne abandoned, and that of Bacchus and his initiates arriving on this scene for the purpose of marrying Ariadne. According to Gaisser (2009:155), these two scenes were familiar to Catullus' readers, as they were frequently depicted in Roman murals. These are the two scenes available to the internal audience in Poem 64, the wedding guests in lines 32-35 who throng together to the palace and fill its chambers — presumably all the way to the centre of the chamber where the wedding couch is draped with the coverlet in line 50 (Gaisser 2009:155). It is certain that they saw the coverlet, and were an eager audience, departing only once they had studiously admired it (Gaisser 1995:591):

*quae postquam cupide spectando Thessala pubes  
 expleta est, sanctis coepit decedere divis.*

Afterwards, having satisfied the lust of their eyes, the people  
 of Thessaly began to make way for the sacred gods. (64.269-270)

However, the external audience — us, the readers of Poem 64 — are additionally treated to a narrative account made up of digressions, speeches, forward-flashes and back-flashes that constitute three additional scenes not present on the coverlet: Theseus and Ariadne in Crete (72-116), Ariadne's final lament (*extremis querellis*) (133 - 202), and the words of Aegeus and his death (208-250) (Gaisser 2009:156).



Gaisser (2009:157) argues that ‘Catullus has woven description with narration to present two coverlets in one: the first for the wedding guests to see, embroidered with two famous scenes from the Ariadne myth, the other for us ...’ The wedding guests see a coverlet that is a fitting adornment for the marriage bed of Thetis and Peleus, embroidered with the tale of the mortal Ariadne, abandoned, but about to marry the divine Bacchus (Gaisser 2009:158). The readers of Poem 64, however, see a coverlet that uncovers a different story — the story of Medea, which is alluded to throughout Poem 64, and which, says Gaisser (2009:158), ‘runs through the narrative episodes as a disturbing counterpoint to that of Ariadne’. The story of Medea runs alongside that of Ariadne in Poem 64. Medea’s love for Jason led her to help him complete his heroic quest to obtain the Golden Fleece — at the cost of her family (including her brother) and her homeland. Jason’s subsequent abandonment of her for a more politically advantageous marriage unleashed a deep and bitter revenge from the hands of Medea. Gaisser (2009:161) asserts that the coverlet is ‘double woven’ to give two different visions of the past to the two audiences: ‘Like a hologram, the coverlet changes its meaning and appearance with the perspective of the beholder, revealing now an appropriate parallel to the joyful wedding of Peleus and Thetis, now a disturbing contrast that emphasizes not Ariadne’s rescue and marriage with the god, but human loss, betrayal and destruction: the story of Medea’.

And this touches on one of Catullus’ neoteric concerns: who is inside and who is outside? As an outsider to the elite socio-political circles of Roman society (de Villiers 2016:34-35), Catullus signals with his Medea allusion that he is shifting the boundaries to suggest that the outsiders (neoterics) are ‘in’ and the insiders (old guard elites) are ‘out’. Konstan (1993:62) points out that the description of Peleus’ mansion in Pharsalus is modelled on a Roman villa inhabited by ‘Roman notables’, ‘complete with atrium and marriage chamber’. It is in this setting that the internal audience of the poem (the elite insiders) see the one view of the coverlet with its traditional depiction of the Ariadne and Theseus story — the one where mute Ariadne will get over her desertion by marrying a god. But for the external audience (the learned neoterics and us), the coverlet reveals a new story with different meaning and a subversive purpose. The in crowd are left out, and the outsiders are brought in.

Thus, Catullus’ ekphrasis is not only disobedient in form and feature, but also in purpose and meaning. There is the positive connotation of the myth as viewed by the internal audience. But the external audience who picks up the allusions and intertextual weaving is allowed a privileged view: an old story is cast in a new light. And the person who gives voice to the meaning is Ariadne / Medea. The poet essentially hands the megaphone over to the mute Ariadne. What does the poet want us to hear?

In order to consider the meaning of Catullus' new telling of the Theseus and Ariadne story for a new audience — the privileged audience outside the poem (Gaisser 2009:157) — we need to consider the various levels of Catullus' identification with Ariadne, grouped together under two chief dimensions of identity discussed in the introduction: the individual as lover, and the public persona of the poet recast as hero, wielding a stylus rather than a sword.

4. *When lyric themes interrupt an epic genre: the manner and purpose of Catullus' identification with Ariadne as lover*

The opening lines of Poem 64 are intended to bring to mind Apollonius' epic recounting of the voyage of the *Argo*, with the heroes Jason and Peleus on board — the same Peleus due to wed Thetis in Catullus' poem (Konstan 1993:61). Along with the allusion to the heroic quest of Jason, comes the bitter revenge of the betrayed Medea — abandoned by this same hero — and the prefiguring of the events that will unfold between Theseus and Ariadne. According to Konstan (1993:61), Catullus establishes this 'pattern of reference' from the start of his poem. In the ekphrasis, this allusive thread emerges as the central line of the poem, as lyric themes explode in the centre of what looks set to be an epic, a celebration of heroes and their deeds.

The ekphrasis begins with these words, describing the coverlet on the marriage bed of the goddess:

*haec vestis priscis hominum variata figuris  
heroum mira virtutes indicat arte*

This coverlet, decorated with the figures of men of bygone times, showed with admirable skill the brave deeds of heroes. (64. 51-52)

Gaisser (1995:592) points to the scholarly agreement that *heroum virtutes* is best interpreted as 'deeds of courage' or 'deeds of prowess', and mentions Konstan's assertion that Catullus may be deliberately exploiting the ambiguity of *virtutes* to also mean 'moral qualities' — thereby giving rise to the opportunity for contradiction between heroic deeds and moral ideals.

This potential for contradiction arises in the very next lines:

*namque fluentisono prospectans litore Diae  
Thesea cedentem celeri cum classe tuetur  
indomitos in corde gerens Ariadna furores,  
necdum etiam sese quae visit visere credit,  
ut pote fallaci quae tunc primum excita somno  
desertam in sola miseram se cernat harena.*

*immemor at iuvenis fugiens pellit vada remis,  
irrita ventosae linquens promissa procellae.*

For indeed, looking out from the shore of Dia, resounding with pounding waves, is Ariadne, nursing wild fury in her heart, watching as Theseus is borne away by his fleet of swift ships. Freshly awake from deceptive sleep, she cannot yet believe what her eyes are taking in, as she sees herself wretchedly abandoned on the lonely sand. But that heedless youth, fleeing, strikes at the sea with his oars, giving up his empty promises to the wavering winds. (64.53-59)

Having been primed for acts of courage and prowess, the scene that follows, linked by the emphatic *namque*, is hardly what we would expect: the heedless hero deserting his lover, fleeing (*fugiens* makes his departure look like an act of cowardice) in his swift ship, leaving his empty promise (of marriage) to the winds. Konstan (1993:68) asserts that the *namque* in line 52 ensures that the episode that directly follows is ‘illustrative of the previous statement’ about the heroic deeds. The contrast between the expectation created in lines 51-52 and what actually transpires makes the reader question whether Catullus is deliberately draining the term *heroum virtutes* of meaning, making it as empty as the promises of *immemor* Theseus, or whether he is indeed telling a different story altogether — ‘a tale of tragic love with a woman at its centre, not a heroic epic of manly deeds. The coverlet promises *virtutes*; we are shown *amores* instead.’ (Gaisser 1995:592) In other words — the epic is interrupted by the lyric.

We are also shown the devastating effect of these heroic deeds on love and marriage in the life of Ariadne (and in the life of Medea, who is never far from mind). It seems Catullus wants us to understand that in epics heroines always get hurt: Theseus leaves his bride-to-be to certain heartbreak and death, while military victory and civic duty consume him (Konstan 1993:73-74), causing him to be *immemor* with regard to Ariadne even while she depends on him with her whole heart, soul and mind (*toto ex pectore, toto animo, tota mente*, 69-70).

For the internal audience of the poem, admiring the two scenes on the coverlet, Ariadne seems to dutifully accept her place in the epic genre as she mutely capitulates to losing her lover to the more noble concerns of the hero, who is homeward bound after a deed of civic duty and the exercise of heroic courage against the monstrous Minotaur, the scourge of his people. He is depicted (evidently with irony) in the narrative within the ekphrasis as the epitome of the self-sacrificing hero as he arrives with seeming ease at the start of his quest:

*quis angusta malis cum moenia vexarentur,  
ipse suum Theseus pro caris corpus Athenis  
proicere optavit potius quam talia Cretam  
funera Cecropiae nec funera portarentur.  
atque ita nave levi nitens ac lenibus auris  
magnanimum ad Minoa venit sedesque superbas.*

When his narrow city walls were jolted by monstrous evils,  
Theseus himself opted to offer his own body for dear Athens  
rather than such Cecropian dead be ferried without funeral to Crete.  
And so, on a light ship and with gentle winds he came brightly  
to noble Minos and his splendid palace. (64.80–85)

And now, he sets off home, in a swift ship, job done. The wedding guests marvelling at the artful coverlet on the wedding couch have no idea of the storm in her breast (*magnis curarum fluctuat undis*, 62), or of the depths of the passion and agony she voices from her heart (*illam ... ardenti corde furentem clarisonas imo fudisse e pectore voces*, 124-125). She is, to them, stoic in the face of her own duty to accept the epic virtue and moral — even divine — duty (*virtus, pietas*) of her departing hero; a figure made familiar through depiction in wall paintings (Gaisser 1995:593). The internal audience is allowed to maintain the conventional view of Roman heroic virtue and morality — but Catullus’ purpose with his ‘disobedient’ ekphrasis is to challenge us, the external audience, as he subverts this view by allowing the lyric to interrupt the epic (Braund 2002:146). He lets the outsiders in.

Catullus does this through his description of the coverlet and through the way his narration weaves the events NOT depicted on the coverlet into the Ariadne and Theseus story. Equally importantly, his subversion is accomplished through the words he gives Ariadne to speak — the lyrics of a lover regarding the hero of the epic. Catullus’ choice of words in describing the coverlet are a cue for the attentive, learned, reader to take a critical stance towards the *heroum virtutes* about to be revealed: the word *indicat* in line 51 can mean simply ‘portray’ or, more significantly ‘expose’, and one of the words to describe the colour of the coverlet in line 49 is *fucio* (*fucus*) — which is also a figurative expression for fraud or deception (Konstan 1993:68). With this clever selection of ambiguous words, Catullus signals an alternative meaning for us: the coverlet that ‘exposes the deeds of heroes is ‘dipped in rosy deception’’ (Konstan 1993:68).

The suggestion of a critical view of traditional heroic *virtus* builds throughout the narrating of the Ariadne and Theseus story in the ekphrasis. The disastrous implications of the public sphere of masculine derring-do for the private, domestic world of love, loyalty, family and covenant reaches its climax with

Ariadne's lament at her cruel desertion by Theseus — the self-same hero of the story (lines 132-201) (Ancona 2008:132).

The first part of Ariadne's lament is a bitter indictment of Theseus' character. It revolves around his broken promise of marriage and his desertion of her after she has left everyone and everything — family, homeland and hearth — for Theseus:

*sicine me patriis avectam, perfide, ab aris  
perfide, deserto liquisti in litore, Theseu?*

So is this, Theseus, how you've left me, faithless one, on a forsaken shore, faithless one, carried far from my homeland altars? (64.132-3)

*at non haec quondam blanda promissa dedisti  
voce mihi, non haec miserae sperare iubebas,  
sed conubia laeta, sed optatos hymenaeos,  
quae cuncta aereii discernunt irrita venti*

But these were not the promises you offered me in suave tones,  
these miseries were not what you ordered me to hope for,  
but rather a happy marriage, a wished-for wedding,  
all empty promises totally plucked apart and scattered on the winds.  
(64.139-142)

The word *virtus*, denoting courage, nobility and moral excellence, is in essence, related to masculinity and military prowess, the quality of being a man (*vir*) (Braund 2002:83). According to Braund (2002:83), masculinity, militarism and morality are inextricably linked in the Roman mind. However, alongside *virtus*, the qualities of mercy (*clementia*), loyal duty (*pietas*), justice (*iustitia*) and faith/faithfulness (*fides*) are 'masculine prerogatives because they belong to the public spheres of action, in military, political, judicial, religious and social matters' (Braund 2002:83). Significantly, Ariadne's descriptions of Theseus are a direct negation of each of these qualities: he is faithless (*perfide*, 132, 133); he lacks *pietas* as he leaves *neglecto numine divum* (134); he has *nulla clementia* (137) and no sense of justice: she snatched him from death (saving him and future Athenian youth), even at the expense of her own brother, and gave him a chance at life, only to be left to a savage and humiliating death as payment (*pro quo dilaceranda feris dabor alitibusque praeda / neque iniacta tumulabor mortua terra*, 152-153). Furthermore, he is *immite* (138) and *immemor* (135) — a bad man concealing savage and cruel intentions behind his handsome appearance (*malus hic celans dulci crudelia forma consilia*, 175). Promising marriage with a seductive voice,

he brings instead betrayal, dashed hopes and the loss of everything, possibly even her life.

Ariadne, rather than Theseus, emerges as the ‘hero’ in these lines — she is the one who has a grasp of the values that constitute the virtues of a hero (*virtutes heroum*) (Brown 2008:21). She critiques his character on the basis of these values, and she conducts herself accordingly (Brown 2008:21). Contrary to the contemporary Roman conception of *amor* as a state of temporary insanity, a very undesirable and un-Roman trait (Konstan 1993:71; de Villiers 2016:131), Ariadne has banked (not risked) everything on the basis of a calculated decision based on *foedus* — on Theseus’ promise of a future covenantal love, which would obviously entail a new family and homeland for her. This is a very clever subversion of *Romanitas* (Braund 2002:84) by Catullus — as he elevates *amor* to the position of *foedus* (a conventional Roman value) here as he does in Poem 109 (de Villiers 2016:130-131), and intends to use it as a platform from which to critique the conventional evaluation of *virtus*.

Through Ariadne’s lament and indictment of Theseus’ character, we are given privileged access at the heart of the poem, to the heart of the poet. For the discerning reader Catullus draws the curtain back on his private pain and also reveals his public purpose: to subvert the conventional Roman values of virtue and masculinity.

The insight into the private pain of Catullus as lover, which we access through the character of Ariadne in Poem 64, is enhanced by the deliberate intertextual echoes with other poems in the Catullan corpus. There are too many to discuss here — so I will make brief reference to four other poems where we hear Catullus’ pain, here echoed in Ariadne’s lament. This will give insight into what he wants to achieve by setting up this resonance for the readers of his oeuvre. As noted by de Villiers (2016:130) ‘the poems in the Catullan corpus engage with one another dialogically and rereading forms an integral part of interpretation’.

#### 4.1

In **Poem 70**, Catullus speaks about *his woman* saying that there is no-one she’d prefer to marry than Catullus — even should Jupiter seek her hand (*Nulli se dicit mulier mea nubere malle / quam mihi, non si se Iuppiter ipse petat, 1-2*). But Catullus undercuts this declaration of faithful, covenantal love with the repetition of ‘she says’ (*dicit*) three times in the poem (Gaisser 2009:32). With each repetition the ‘eager lover’ — Catullus — increasingly reveals a bedrock mistrust of the words and promises of the *mulier* — whom we more than suspect is Lesbia (Gaisser 2009:32). He goes on to contradict Lesbia’s desire, or even ability, to back up her words with deeds as he makes this bitterly cynical observation about *women in general*:

*dicit; sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti,  
in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua.*

She *says* ... But what a woman says to her panting lover  
ought to be written in wind and fast-flowing water. (70.3-4)

The promises of a woman to her eager lover have no substance; they are whisked away by wind and rushing water. De Villiers (2016:134) notes that Catullus the lover did not entrust his woman's words about her desire to marry him to the vagaries of wind and water — Catullus the poet in fact wrote them down on paper so that we, the readers, become witnesses to Lesbia's expressed desire. This exact sentiment is expressed in the same progression from particular to general, by Ariadne as she generalises about men based on her experience of *perfidie* and *immemor* Theseus.

*nunc iam nulla viro iuranti femina credat,  
nulla viri speret sermones esse fideles;  
quis dum aliquid cupiens animus praegestit apisci,  
nil metuunt iurare, nihil promittere parcunt:  
sed simul ac cupidae mentis satiata libido est,  
dicta nihil metuere, nihil periuria curant.*

From now on, let no woman trust a man's vows,  
let no woman hope that a man's talk is trustworthy;  
for while his desire-crazed mind lusts to lay hold of something,  
there is nothing they fear to swear to, nothing they hold back from  
promising:  
but as soon as their lust is slaked, desire sated,  
they take no notice of their words, they care nothing for their false  
promises. (64.144-49)

The oaths and promises poured out by men in the heat of desire vanish once lust is gratified, just like Theseus' promise of *conubia laeta* in line 141 is shredded by the mocking winds in line 142. But we, the external audience, hear of Theseus' promises as Ariadne recounts them.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the poet Catullus takes her words about Theseus' promises and lets them fall on responsive ears within the poem - they don't disappear on the wind, but are heard by the Furies, whom Ariadne cries

<sup>5</sup> In 64.164-166 Ariadne despairs of her own words of pain and her words about Theseus' *irrita promissa* being heard by no-one, as she pours out her complaint vainly to the winds. Yet, as the external audience in the know, we hear her 'unheard' lament, and we also know that her words reach the ears of the Furies and Jupiter in lines 205-206.

out to for justice in 192-201, and Jupiter gives the nod in lines 202-209 — with cosmic consequences that prove tragic for Theseus and his family:

*has postquam maesto profudit pectore voces,  
 supplicium saevis ecens anxia factis,  
 annuit invicto caelestum numine rector;  
 quo motu tellus atque horrida contremuerunt  
 aequora concussitque micantia sidera mundus.  
 ipse autem caeca mentem caligine Theseus  
 consitus oblito dimisit pectore cuncta,  
 quae mandata prius constanti mente tenebat*

After she poured out these words from her sorrowful heart,  
 pleading anxiously for punishment for his cruel deeds,  
 the ruler of heaven nodded his sovereign assent.  
 At which the earth and bristling seas wavered,  
 and the world of glittering stars shook.  
 But Theseus himself, his mind in blind fog,  
 let go from his forgetful heart all the commands  
 which until then he held rooted in his mind. (64.202 -209)

Beyond the poetic justice within the internal world of Poem 64, a consequence of Catullus' poetic art in works such as Poem 70 and Poem 64 is that the private pain of a lover becomes public as the poet-lover commits the wind-tattered words of a beloved to the ears of the right audience. In ancient Rome, the poet's words were intended to be animated and interpreted by public or private readers or *lectors* (Gaisser 2009:42) — and this is part of the dynamic of using words to overturn a powerless situation, using it as an occasion for exerting power. This power of the poet to make words do deeds will be explored further in the section 5.

#### 4.2

In **Poem 109** we see what Catullus thinks of love and friendship. Again, we see the emergence of the theme of promises taken lightly, and promises broken. Catullus' dearest (*mea vita*), most certainly Lesbia, (Ferguson 1985:329), has set forth, declared even, that their love shall be joyous and eternal: *lucundum, mea vita, mihi proponis amorem / hunc nostrum inter nos perpetuumque fore*, 1-2. The very next line is a prayer to the gods to make it so that (*facit ut*) Lesbia's promise is true, spoken sincerely and from her heart: *di magni, facite ut vere promittere possit, / atque id sincere dicat et ex animo*, 3-4. Ferguson (1985:329) notes, however, the 'startling ambiguity' of *di magni*, since the phrase is customarily used to communicate astonishment — which reveals Catullus' underlying doubt about the



truth of her words. The final line gets to the heart of the poem. According to Ferguson (1985:330), Catullus desires to formalise a legal bond (*foedus*) of *amicitia* with Lesbia: ‘This again is a very subtly used concept. For *amica* is the ordinary Latin for ‘girl-friend’ (cf. 72, 3). *Amicitia* thus in this line swings from the expected relationship with a girl-friend to that formal bond of partnership which was the basis of Roman political and social order. The relationship which, it was assumed, could only exist between men is transferred to the relationship between a man and a woman’.

According to Gaisser (2009:66), ‘The love affair with Lesbia is something new, or at least the persona tries to make it so. [Catullus] tries to transform it from an essentially sexual affair into something else: an erotic relationship lived in concordance with the ideals of aristocratic friendship. To put it another way, Catullus tries to bring Lesbia and their affair into a region of moral seriousness and commitment, created and valued (if not always lived up to) by aristocratic men. He prays for such an affectionate union. This prayer ... is destined to fail’. Catullus, through the success of Ariadne’s prayer, shows how the gods respond to her curse of revenge, and there is perhaps a gratuitous, vicarious satisfaction in revenge on Theseus / Lesbia — but this is also an attempt to elevate Ariadne’s private pain and make it count in the public sphere. To say, in fact, that a hero cannot ignore such a commitment to eternal love and still be a hero (de Villiers 2016:269).

As discussed above, with Ariadne’s lament about *perfide* Theseus in lines 132-134 of Poem 64, Ariadne emerges as the *exemplum* of heroism when Catullus shows us that Ariadne’s grief is not just the temporary insanity of *amor*, (Ferguson 1985:330) but the valid outrage of a person who feels the deep hurt of a broken *foedus* (promise of marriage). The gods invoked in Catullus’ prayer in Poem 109 do not answer, despite his desire for an eternal commitment of *amor* / *amicitia*. Catullus the lover identifies with Ariadne’s sorrow, and Catullus the poet takes things a few steps further in Poem 64: the gods may not have brought about a celebration of marriage for Theseus and Ariadne (like they did for Thetis and Peleus), but they certainly wrought the sought-after vengeance Ariadne calls for in lines 200-201. The gods work the justice the situation demands, since there seems to be no justice among men (echoing Catullus’ moralizing epilogue). Catullus has Ariadne entreating the faithfulness of the gods above to stand in for the faithlessness of Theseus:

*non tamen ante mihi languescent lumina morte,  
nec prius a fesso secedent corpore sensus,  
quam iustam a divis exposcam prodita multam  
caelestumque fidem postrema comprecet hora.*

Yet my eyes will not droop in death,  
 nor my senses withdraw from my drained body  
 until I beg from the gods justice for my betrayal  
 and plead with heavenly beings for faith in my final hour.

(64.188-192).

And this time, unlike the ambiguity of Poem 109, the gods respond. Jupiter gives the nod and Theseus is undone. Again, the broader purpose here is to elevate the private, feminised world of *amor* to the level of ‘eternal covenant’ so that it may question the traditional morality of a society that valued the realm of the public, masculine *virtus*.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.3

In **Poem 11**, Catullus deliberately calls to mind Poem 51 as both are the only poems in the Catullan corpus written in Sapphic meter (Gaisser 2009:213). Gaisser (2009:213) citing Lindsay suggests that, when first dazzled with Lesbia, Catullus used Poem 51 to approach her and after the relationship ended he ‘chose the same meter to reject her’. There are two aspects of this poem that offer the attentive reader insight into what Catullus is doing and saying in Poem 64. Again, it revolves around Catullus’ identification with a woman, Ariadne, and his criticism of conventional Roman public values and masculinity by spotlighting the private world of love on a public stage.

In Poem 11 Catullus criticizes Rome’s lust for imperial power, which is what Catullus is implying in his ‘travelogue’ in lines 1-14; this brutalizing appetite for conquest is ‘echoed in the acts of another of her citizens, whose carnal greed is equally boundless: Lesbia’. (de Villiers 2016:152). This is yet again evidence of Catullus’ critical stance toward the Roman values of militarism and imperialistic masculinity (summed up in the concept of *virtus*), and of the poet’s implication that these very values represent a threat to the private world of a man who loves, a man willing to risk scorn by putting private vulnerability on public display. Catullus exposes his personal vulnerability through the delicate crafting of the final image

---

<sup>6</sup> Gaisser (2009:67) notes: ‘But Catullus’ aspirations are immoral as well as impossible. His relationship is adulterous, and the compact he proposes, its lofty ring notwithstanding, flies in the face of all traditional morality, a fact he never acknowledges’. Ferguson (1985:200) also points out: ‘It is important to see Ariadne is not guiltless ... her guilt is explicitly stated. She has been a traitor to her parents (vv.117-18), she has helped to murder her brother (vv.149-153, 181). There is no idealization here, rather a candid realism’. Thus we see the correspondence of Catullus and Ariadne at an even deeper level. Both are guilty of breaching bonds of differing kinds — but Catullus does not hide their guilt, and while he and Ariadne are both stained themselves, it does not stop him from upholding the moral ideal of covenantal love for society to take note of.

of Lesbia destroying his love (and innocence?) as thoughtlessly, yet as surely, as a plough nicking a flower kills it:

*nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem,  
qui illius culpa cecidit velut prati  
ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam  
tactus aratro est.*

Nor let her look back for my love, as before,  
which she has caused to fall, like a flower  
at the furthest edge of the field is  
casually killed by a passing plough.

(11.21-24)

The image of ploughing a furrow is often associated with the ‘male sex act’, and Ferguson (1985:44) indicates that with this image of a flower being broken by a plough, Catullus is reversing roles. He is identifying himself with the woman, the victim of love left crushed by the casual disregard of her lover.

This identification with a woman, hinted at in Poem 11, is brought to full flower in Catullus’ identification with Ariadne in Poem 64. When we read Poem 64 Catullus shows us that, unlike Lesbia in Poem 11 of whom he says: *cum suis vivat valeatque moechis*, it is not an act of adultery on Theseus’ part that undoes his lover, but his commitment to this kind of *virtus*. In Poem 11, the death of love takes place away from the public eye, at the edge of a far-flung field. Ironically, the act of making this private tragedy public by sharing it with an audience is an act of empowerment of the disempowered lover. Similarly, Ariadne’s despair at her unheeded, private suffering — unheard and unanswered by the insensate winds — is ironic, as her despair is heeded: *sed quid ego ignaris nequiquam conquerar auris / externata malo, quae nullis sensibus auctae / nec missas audire queunt nec reddere voces* (164-166). Catullus the lover identifies with her agony, and Catullus the poet delivers her from her mute agony on the embroidered coverlet, from her solitude on a deserted shore, by giving her a public audience for her private grief.

#### 4.4

**Poem 30** is another poem where Catullus’ personal pain is allowed to resonate through Ariadne’s lament in Poem 64. According to Ferguson (1985:94) this poem gives us a key to understanding Catullus’ other poems, including Poem 64, as it highlights two of his vital concerns — firstly ‘that *amicitia* is a *foedus*’ and that *fides*, considered together with *pietas*, is central to life: to break *fides* is ‘to betray life itself’.

There are a number of significant words, concepts and images in Poem 30 that are repeated in Ariadne’s speech in Poem 64. Catullus calls Alfenus *immemor*

in line 1, and *perfide* in line 3, echoing Ariadne's words in her address to Theseus. Catullus accuses Alfenus of being negligent and heedless and of deserting him — echoing Ariadne's words about Theseus:

*sicine me patriis avectam, perfide, ab aris  
perfide, deserto liquisti in litore, Theseu?  
sicine discedens neglecto numine divum,  
immemor a! devota domum periuria portas.*

So is this, Theseus, how you've left me, faithless one, on a forsaken shore, faithless one, carried far from my homeland altars?

So this is how you depart, disregarding divine power and presence, heedless one! You carry your perjured vows home with you.

(64.132-135)

De Villiers (2016:177) notes that Alfenus' *facta impia* are not deeds, but are in fact the absence thereof, which Catullus sums up in Poem 30 as forgetfulness — *immemor* in line 1, and *neglegis* and *deseris* in line 5. This holds true for Ariadne's charge against Theseus too. Ferguson (1985:94) says of Poem 30: 'This poem establishes a system of values in which we will read those others. Lines 9-10 in particular will be important later. The promises going to the winds is used directly of Lesbia (70.4), and indirectly too since the Ariadne-Catullus Theseus-Lesbia equation is inescapable'.

A noteworthy contrast with *immemor* in Poem 30 — which adumbrates the Catullan twist in the Ariadne / Theseus story in Poem 64 — is that the gods will remember, Faith remembers, and Alfenus will regret his *facta impia*, that is, his forgetfulness:

*si tu oblitus es, at di meminerunt, meminit Fides  
quae te ut paeniteat postmodo facti faciet tui.*

Even if you forget, the gods remember — Faith remembers!  
she will make sure you shortly regret your actions. (30.11-12)

This is exactly what happens in Poem 64 — the gods remember and Theseus is punished for being *immemor* with regard to Ariadne by being *immemor* with regard to Aegeus. The moral universe proposed by Catullus, and which pleases the gods, is one in which *fides* takes centre stage. And here, in Poem 64, Catullus redefines the sphere in which *fides* is required: being faithful in the public arena of manly virtue requires being faithful in the private arena of covenantal love.

As we see from these four poems, Catullus' own laments about his betrayal at the hands of Lesbia and others echo in the mouth of Ariadne. There is a clear

identification at the level of betrayal in love. But Catullus is not merely ‘securing emotional release’ through this identification; he is not ‘turning to mythology’ because ‘epigram and elegy’ are not able to ‘convey Catullus’ concept of what love might be’, as Daniels (1967:351) suggests. He has a larger purpose than this — one that will challenge the status quo — and it hinges on the charge against Theseus of being *immemor*.

De Villiers (2016:266) notes that this is a heavily freighted word in the Catullan corpus:

... the betrayal inherent in forgetfulness, which involves the violation of *fides / pietas*, threatens the very existence of the betrayed self. The same disregard for the traditional codes of conduct described by *pietas, fides, gratia* and *benevolentia*, which the Catullan speaker so painfully experienced in his relationships with lovers and friends (e.g., poems 30, 73, 76), also features in Theseus’ forgetfulness of Ariadne.

Ariadne’s reference to Theseus as *perfide* and *immemor*<sup>7</sup> as a lover will prove to be his undoing as a hero. Brown (2008:22) points out that the placement of *immemor* at the start of line 135 serves to highlight Theseus’ total disregard for Ariadne’s feelings. Brown (2008:22) cites the Oxford Latin Dictionary meaning of *immemor* as ‘not remembering, forgetful’, with the further meaning of ‘not remembering one’s obligations’ and ‘not thinking of consequences’ — both of which prove to apply to Theseus: he forgets his promise of marriage to Ariadne — ‘a violation of *fides / pietas*’ (de Villiers 2016:266) — and he cannot foresee the tragic consequences his forgetfulness and thoughtlessness will have for him and his father, Aegeus.

This leads us to one of the most subtle and polished ways in which Catullus weaves together the threads of epic *virtus* and lyric *amor* in order to subvert the conventional ideas of Roman masculinity, morality — what Braund (2002:84) calls *Romanitas*.

According to Braund (2002:84), the father-son relationship was the ideal way in which Roman values (*virtus, pietas, fides, clementia, iustitia* etc.), were

---

<sup>7</sup> Gaisser (1995:596) points out that in some versions, Theseus’ forgetfulness is due to the work of Bacchus, which exonerates him as his behaviour is not voluntary. But, since we are reading Catullus’ version of the story, we only have Ariadne’s perspective, and in it we encounter Theseus as a moral agent who is deficient in *fides* and *virtus*. Ironically, the forgetfulness for which he *can* be exonerated, since it was caused by the Jupiter, is the forgetfulness of his promise to his father — leading to Aegeus’ death, and the end of a vital socio-political relationship: that of father and son. Yet even here, ultimately he is to blame, since that forgetfulness was divine punishment for his forgetfulness in his promise to Ariadne.

transmitted from generation to generation. For the Romans, the ultimate figures of authority were the ancestors and fathers, as the transmission of learning, principles and values from father to son was essential to maintaining the ways and customs of the elders, the *'mos maiorum'*, which is the essence of *Romanitas* (Braund 2002:86).

In lines 215-237, Catullus narrates another flashback, in which Aegeus is addressing his son, Theseus, before he sets off on his heroic quest. We have a note of warning that the quest will not end well with Aegeus' reference to the quest arising due to his bad fortune and Theseus' fiery bravery (*quandoquidem fortuna mea ac tua feruida virtus eripit invito mihi te*, 218-219). Aegeus then orders his son to raise white sails on his return voyage if he is safe and alive, saying:

*tum vero facito ut memori tibi condita corde  
haec vigeant mandata, nec ulla oblitteret aetas.*

Then in truth ensure that these commands thrive, so that they are  
established  
and heeded in your heart, nor let any passing of time root them out.

(64.231-232)

Theseus is urged by his father to be *memor*, thoughtful, to take heed, to remember in the strongest possible way — in and with his heart. And yet he forgets his father's orders as he sails home after his quest, with tragic consequences as his father plunges to his death in grief. Catullus reveals in lines 256-258 the direct link between the *immemor* Theseus as lover and the *immemor* Theseus as son:

*sic funesta domus ingressus tecta paterna  
morte ferox Theseus, qualem Minoidi luctum  
obtulerat mente immemori, talem ipse recepit.*

And so, as fierce Theseus entered his father's home, doomed  
with death, he himself received the same grief that he had  
inflicted on Minos' daughter with his unmindful mind. (64.246-248)

The forgetful mind of Theseus is the link between the two scenes featuring Ariadne's tragic loss and Aegeus' tragic death (and Theseus' loss). Theseus' *mens immemor* is the cause of both Ariadne's suffering and Aegeus' death (Putnam 1961:185-186). Coming back to the centrality of the father-son relationship in the transmission of *Romanitas* (Braund 2002:84), Catullus here shows that the breaking of a promise in a private love relationship has a causal connection with the breach in a paternal relationship that is vital to Theseus' identity as a man of moral action, as a man able to embody the public, masculine values of heroic

*virtus*. *Perfide* Theseus has not just broken a private promise of marriage, but in so doing, has broken a vital link in the chain of tradition, the customs handed over by the elders (*mos maiorum*). (Braund 2002:86).

In Catullus' depiction of Ariadne's suffering, the private, feminised world of the lover, filled with hope of eternal love and domestic bliss are shown to be smashed by the juggernaut that is the public world of masculine heroism. Yet, issuing from the personal grief of a betrayed woman in love is the destruction of the public, socio-political relationship that is the very source of the hero's manliness (Braund 2002:84): the death of his father. And the agent of destruction is Ariadne, through her curse of Theseus. The powerless victim wields a power invisible to the internal audience of Poem 64. As the external audience of Poem 64, we are expected to be arrested by this deep irony, and ponder deeply what Catullus is saying and doing with it. For Catullus shows how devastating it is for the public values of a society, for its morality and cohesiveness, when the world of love, marriage and family is disregarded. And the implication is that the reverse is true: the moral action in the private arena supports and enriches moral action in the public arena.<sup>8</sup>

One could say the internal audience within the poem sees a mute Ariadne, the epic heroine (or collateral damage in modern warfare terms) who is about to marry a god. The public audience outside the poem hears Ariadne speak: for the first time we hear from the private, personal, marginalised world of love and betrayal in the midst of an epic bristling with deeds of apparent *virtus* and *pietas*. But Catullus is not giving the megaphone to Ariadne merely to let us hear how great the fears were that troubled her faintly beating heart (*quantos illa tulit languenti corde timores*, 99). He wants to effect change through her words, as certainly as her words effected change in the public life of the Athenian king and his son. The poet Catullus wields his stylus like a sword, and redefines what it means for a Roman to love and what a Roman hero looks like — a man who does deeds that are courageous and morally excellent.

Behind and above all this is the poet's purpose of showing the power of the stylus: Catullus is doing this work of subversion and redefining public morality with words, just as surely as the words of Ariadne's curse do their work.

---

<sup>8</sup> The epilogue of Poem 64, with its 'ethical critique' is where we see this developed most fully — human wickedness worked out at a familial level has, in turn, public and cosmic consequences (Konstan 1993:76; Gaisser 1995:613). One assumes Catullus also intends to signify the opposite: morality worked out in the private sphere of love and family will resonate in the public sphere of socio-political operation.

5. *The clash of the stylus and the sword: the manner and purpose of Catullus' identification with Ariadne as hero/ine*

The Myth of Ariadne and Theseus has been plastic from the earliest ages, pressed into service of different agendas at different times (Webster 1966:22). Catullus has done what poets have done before and wrought this myth into a new shape, pressed it into service of a different set of values, and Virgil and others after him will take up his work and continue it (Konstan 1993:69-70; Uhlfelder 1955:310; Putnam 1995:81; Westendorp Boerma 1958:59).

Ariadne, the powerless heroine hurt by the epic hero, is transformed by the stylus of Catullus the poet — the first to link Theseus' tragedy with his treatment of Ariadne (Gaisser 1995:604) — into a heroic figure whose words have power to effect change as certainly as actions do (Ancona 2008:134). Catullus shows the poet's stylus to be as mighty, if not mightier, than the hero's sword. Catullus demonstrates in Poem 64 that words matter: the negative example of words spoken in curse and fulfilled by the gods (64.193-201) show that the positive example of words spoken in promise (64.139-141) have weight and reality. He also shows that it is not words of *amor* that are swept away by wind and water (see the discussion in section 3 of how the lover's private words in Poem 70 and Poem 64 are paradoxically made public and permanent for an audience) but that it is the deeds of *virtus* without *amor* that become as insubstantial as if swept away by wind and water. The roles are reversed in in Poem 64, where the Ariadne the heroine is the source of action and Theseus the hero is the unseen, silent character of no substance.

Ariadne's words do two things:

- \* They interrogate what it means to be truly heroic, as she reveals the character of 'heroic' Theseus to be perfidious, in violation of covenant, and forgetful of his words of promise and duty (to her as lover, **and therefore** to his father as the source of *virtus*). (Braund 2002:84). As arbiter of what constitutes *virtus*, Ariadne reveals herself to possess those characteristics. For Catullus, she becomes the exemplum of *virtus* in the poem (Brown 2008:31, Braund 2002:83).
- \* They show the inherent substance and power of words to do things, to redefine reality and change the course of events as surely as the *virtutes heroum* depicted on the coverlet are credited with doing. Her private lament, and desire for justice, her plea to the gods for help, are heard, acted upon, and manifested in the public realm, resulting in a father-son relationship, the wellspring of *virtus* in conventional Roman morality (Braund 2002:84), being rent asunder through the death of Aegaeus, just as



surely as the promise and covenant of love between Theseus and Ariadne was broken (64.238-248).

In Catullus' identification with Ariadne as hero/ine, he does two things:

- \* In Poem 64, Catullus subverts conventional Roman values and morality by redefining heroism, and with it, what it means to be a Roman. According to Ancona (2008:132), in Poem 64, 'Love is portrayed as an important value and fidelity to larger social goals (killing a monster, fighting a war) at the cost of the emotional and 'personal' world of love and family is seen as dangerous, thoughtless, and brutal.' The Romans 'inculcated' the desired civic and moral virtues in the populace through the use of positive and negative *exempla* in poetry and narrative (Braund 2002:83). In Poem 64, Catullus uses the heroic *exemplum* of Ariadne positively, and that of Theseus negatively (Brown 2008:22; Braund 2002:83-84), to formulate a new centre of gravity for thinking about *virtutes heroum*. Through the negative example of Theseus and the tragic outworking of him being *immemor* and *perfides*, Catullus establishes a positive, causal link between being faithful in the private sphere of *amor* and being successful in the public sphere of *virtus*. For Catullus, as seen in Poem 64 (and the echoes of his other poems in this poem) the true hero does not destroy his faithful beloved, but is himself a faithful lover (*fides*) committed to the marriage covenant (*foedus*), who takes promises seriously (he is not *immemor*), and whose deeds and words are in accord (*justitia*). With the new hero comes a new morality where *amor* is elevated to the public realm of *foedus* and *amicitia*, and where the masculine qualities of *fides*, *clementia*, *benevolentia*, *gratia*, *amicitia* — honoured in word if not in deed in the Roman socio-political sphere — are to be operative in the private, domestic sphere (Braund 2002:83, Tatum: 2007:348).
- \* As Ariadne's words work, so do Catullus'. The stylus is as mighty, if not mightier, than the sword. The poet can best the hero. The poet *is* the hero. Says Ancona (2008:134):

One of the central issues at stake in Catullus' poems is the issue of power and its relationship to masculinity. While Catullus flirts with passivity and the feminine, for example, as the lover abandoned by, hurt by Lesbia, he also takes on the (masculine) power of the poet to describe his own powerlessness in love. In addition, he makes use of aggressive language, cursing Lesbia and others who hurt him or question his masculinity, despite his delight in playing with the feminine. Just as Catullus and Ariadne both

function as hurt, abandoned lovers, so too they know revenge. Thus words, including cursing or invective, so central to the Catullan corpus, Lesbia poems and non-Lesbia poems alike, allow ‘non-heroic’ figures to partake of some of the *virtus* of heroic deeds. Words can make things happen, too.

## 6. Conclusion

Emasculated, feminised, betrayed and deserted (Ancona 2008:133), Catullus emerges the victor through his identification with Ariadne, the new hero. In Poem 64, with its echoes from the other poems discussed in this essay, Catullus’ words override the deeds of those who have hurt him because he has the last word (Ancona 2008:134). As de Villiers (2016:178), citing Thom, notes with regard to Poem 30 — and by extension, this applies to Poem 64 — the poem itself is the poet’s retribution.

The evidence for Catullus’ success in his purposes in identifying with Ariadne in Poem 64 is there for us to see in at least two ways. Firstly, history in general proves him right. The stylus is mightier than the sword: Catullus does have the last word — Alfenus and Lesbia are silent, and we know of them only through Catullus, who still speaks to his audience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through his poetry. In addition, Catullus’ redefinition of heroism casts him as hero, not hapless victim. He defines Alfenus and Lesbia and others as *perfade* and *immemor*, relegating them to the same category as the silent, insubstantial Theseus of Poem 64, and intimates that the gods are on his side, not on theirs. It is as if Catullus makes his diagnosis of what is wrong with the Roman world: the faithless and heedless are at the core of the rot (and by implication, he is not). This plays very much into the neoteric us/them tendency to define themselves as the ‘in crowd’ and the traditional, elite luminaries of the Roman world as the ‘outsiders’ (de Villiers 2016:44). Catullus uses his poetry to pull the carpet out from under the establishment, and he does it in a very urbane, witty and learned way.

Secondly, literary history specifically shows that Catullus *did* manage to subvert conventional Roman morality in that he provides the starting point for the ‘evolution of multiple and intersecting traditions in the representation of feminine passion and heroic callousness’ (Konstan 1993:70). According to Westendorp Boersma (1958:59) the ‘spirit of Ariadne’s tragedy in Catul. 64 is present everywhere’ in Book IV of the *Aeneid*. Vergil’s Dido also demonstrates the power of words, as her curse follows Rome down the centuries, eventuating in future enmity between Rome and Carthage in the Punic Wars (Ancona 2008:133).

Vergil’s Dido is based on Catullus’ Ariadne, and Book 4 of the *Aeneid* serves to subtly question and undermine the metanarrative of this Roman epic by

asking if the cost of imperialism and heroism is too high when all things are considered (Konstan 1993:69).

Uhlfelder (1995:331) comments on Vergil's genius in making Dido's suffering universal: 'Dido is not merely the queen of Carthage deserted by Trojan Aeneas, but rather any woman disappointed and cheated by the man she loves, a man upon whose gratitude and affections she has just claims'.

And this brings us right back to Ariadne, and to Catullus' identification with her. Knopp (1976:207) says this about Poem 64: 'CATULLUS 64 is a complex and puzzling poem. It purports to be a marriage song for Peleus and Thetis, but contains at its centre the tragic love of Theseus and Ariadne. It hails the age of heroes, but depicts heroic deeds which are less than admirable. Interpretations of the poem tend to emphasize either one or the other of these aspects, making the theme either a contrast between happy and unhappy love or an ironic comment on the heroic age.' She goes on to say that the theme of Poem 64 is not either love or heroism, but is the conflict between *amores* and *virtutes*.

However, is it possible that, through the careful crafting of the Ariadne / Theseus story, Catullus has put the spotlight on the conflict between *amor* and *virtus* in order to resolve it? Through redefining *virtus* to include *amor* at the level of *amicitia* and *foedus*, Catullus has recast the bond between lovers as an eternal covenant of love that needs to be taken seriously. Epic heroines are traditionally given short shrift, and Catullus identifies with them (he is in the role of abandoned, foreign, Medea and Ariadne). But he retells their stories in such a way to change how we see them and to question the kind of morality that can ignore the human collateral damage in many an epic tale. The internal audience (the in crowd) don't hear the heroine or count the cost of heroism. But the newcomers on the outside (Catullus and the other neoterics) hear and see, and for those who want to know, these 'parvenus of Parnassus' work to make the invisible(private) visible(public) and the unheard heard (Johnson 2007:176).

So, Catullus identifies with Ariadne as lover, and as poet whose words work. He fashions a new kind of heroism, where love is taken seriously, and a new kind of hero, who knows the value of words to accomplish deeds. And history bears him out — just as he hoped it would in his opening poem, when he expressed this desire for his new little book (*novum labellum*):

*plus uno maneat perenne saeclo. (1.10)*

(May it endure through all seasons, for more than one lifetime).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Ancona, R 2008. Making connections: Teaching Catullus Poem 64 (Lines 50-253). In The larger context of the Catullan corpus and other Latin poetry. *The Classical Outlook* 85.4:132-135.  
Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43939229>
- Braund, S M 2002. *Latin Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Brown, C P 2008. *Ariadne as the exemplum of the virtues of heroes in Catullus Carmen 64. Theses, Dissertations and Capstones. Paper 513*. Marshall University.
- Daniels, M 1967. Personal revelation in Catullus 64. *The Classical Journal* 62.8:351-356. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3295589>
- De Villiers, A 2016. *Catullus decentred: The poetics of the periphery*. Dissertation presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Stellenbosch University.
- Ferguson, J 1985. *Catullus*. Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press.
- Gaisser, J H 1995. Threads in the labyrinth: Competing views and voices in Catullus 64. *The American Journal of Philology* 116.4:579-616.
- 2009. *Catullus*. Blackwell introductions to the Classical World. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Johnson, W R 2007. Neoteric poets. In Skinner, M (ed.). *A companion to Catullus*, 175-189. Blackwell companions to the Ancient World. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Knopp, S 1976. Catullus 64 and the conflict between amores and virtutes. *Classical Philology* 71.3:207-213.  
Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/267957>
- Konstan, D 1993. Neoteric epic: Catullus 64. In Boyle, A J (ed.). *Roman epic*, 59-78. Abington-on-Thames: Routledge.
- Laird, A 1993. Sounding out ecphrasis: Art and text in Catullus 64. *The Journal of Roman Studies* 83:18-30.
- Putnam, M C J 1961. The art of Catullus 64. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 65:165-205.
- 1995. The lyric genius of the *Aeneid*. *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 3.2-3:81-101.
- Tatum, W J 2007. Social commentary and political invective. In Skinner, M (ed.). *A Companion to Catullus*, 175-189. Blackwell companions to the Ancient World. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Trail, D 1988. Aesthetic patterning in Catullus: Textual structures, systems of imagery and book arrangements. *The Classical World* 81.5:365-369.
- Uhlfelder, M L 1955. Medea, Ariadne, and Dido. *The Classical Journal* 50.7:310-312.

Webster, T B L 1966. The myth of Ariadne from Homer to Catullus. *Greece & Rome* 13.1:22-31.

Westendorp Boersma, R E H 1958. Vergil's debt to Catullus. *Acta Classica* 1:51-63.