

Catullus' *Virgines* and the Interpretive Crux at *Carmen* 61.224-225

As Catullus brings c. 61 to a close, the narrator says: *claudite ostia, virgines:/ lusimus satis* ("close the gates, virgins, we've played enough," 224-225). The *virgines* invoked here have been variously interpreted. Believing the *ostia* to be the *Haustur* of the bridegroom, Friedrich believes the *virgines* are domestic slaves, who attend the home of the groom. Fedeli, alternatively, suggests that the *virgines* are the *integrae virgines* invoked at l. 37, the young women who are constructed as participants in the ode's *deductio*. Thomson, seeing no clear answer to the problem, dismisses the question by referring to it as 'antiquarian.' The lack of consensus suggests that Catullus may be doing something that has previously gone unnoticed, and I propose that Catullus wants us to recognize the *virgines* as the Muses. In support of this interpretation, I use the broader literary context of the poem, Catullan comparanda, and a previously unrecognized allusion by Catullus to Bacchylides' 5th ode.

Following the Greek practice of referring to the Muses as *parthenoi* (e.g. Pindar *I.* 8.127), Catullus twice uses *virgines* elsewhere as a reference to the Muses (<o> *patrona virgo*, 1.9; *doctis virginibus*, 65.2), and this corroborates the suggestion that the *virgines* are the Muses at 61.224. Just as Catullus uses *patrona* with *virgo* at 1.9 and *doctis* with *virginibus* at 65.2 to disambiguate the otherwise unclear reference to *virgo/virgines*, so too he adds *lusimus* to clarify the *virgines* at 61.225. For Catullus and Roman poets following Catullus, *ludere* regularly refers to poetic composition (e.g. cc. 50.2, 50.5, 68.17, cf. Wagenvoort), and it should be understood so here, since it is fitting for the narrator to have 'played' poetically in the construction of c. 61 with the Muses, but it would make little sense for him to have played poetically with other *virgines*.

The reference to *ostia* has also been problematic for previous scholars who wonder to what 'door(s)' the *ostia* refer. Scholars are divided whether *ostia* should refer literally to the front

door of the groom's house (e.g. Friedrich 279) or to the *thalamus* door (e.g. Fedeli 142), while Ellis (239) recognizes that the use of *ostia* in reference to a literal door is unparalleled in the age of Catullus. I suggest that the confusion over *ostia* derives from our not previously recognizing that Catullus here uses *ostia* metaphorically rather than literally. Since *lusimus* denotes poetic composition, when the narrator says 'close the gates, we've played enough,' he uses metaphor to say that the poem should end.

Catullus' metaphor is apparent once we recognize the epinician allusion behind it. In ode 5, Bacchylides' chorus calls upon a Muse to help them bring that ode to an end (λευκώλενε Καλλιόπα,/ στᾶσον εὐποίητον ἄρμα/ αὐτοῦ, "White-armed Calliope, station your well-made chariot here," 176-8). Bacchylides' invocation to the Muse is categorized in epinician criticism as an example of the Abbruchformel, since Bacchylides 'breaks off' from the narrative and addresses the Muse (Pindar uses the *topos* too: *P.* 11.38, *N.* 16-8). Both Catullus and Bacchylides, then, use the Abbruchformel and metaphor to ask the Muse(s) to help bring their odes to an end.

Catullus 61.224-225, accordingly, should be understood differently than it previously has. The Muses (*virgines*) shut the gates (*ostia*) of the poem, and the narrator says that the poem should end since he and the Muses have played enough (*lusimus satis*). Steiner has argued that Catullus uses an epinician allusion pointedly in c. 68 to draw parallels to Pindar's *Olympian* 10, and I suggest that her argument is corroborated by the fact that *doctus* Catullus does the same thing here in c. 61. Once the audience recognizes Catullus' allusion in c. 61 to Bacchylides 5, several thematic similarities become apparent, including the importance of bridal themes and the use of the Muses in ring composition in both odes. In fact, Catullus uses ring composition as a formal device in three other of his *carmina maiora* (e.g. c. 63, 64, 68; cf. Traill 1988). The

recognition of the *virgines* as the Muses in c. 61, then, provides a further example of ring composition in Catullus' *carmina maiora* and, accordingly, has important repercussions for understanding Catullus' formal use of ring composition.

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