

An Insignificant Weed: War-torn Loss in Catullus 11

To make sense of the thematic unity of Catullus 11, scholars read the image of the mowed flower (lines 22-24) as a metaphor for imperial conquest (Forsyth 1991, Greene 1998, Konstan 2000 & 2011, Shapiro 2012). When discussing the metaphor, scholars liken the image of the cut-down flower to Rome's broad conquest of land, like that of Britannia or other areas outside of Rome. Shapiro, for instance, describes this destroyed flower as a conquered province (Shapiro 2012: 45-6). Yet, a closer reading of the relevant lines does not just suggest that the mowed flower represent a wholesale takeover of lands or provinces, but, I argue, the collateral destruction of an innocent person within that province (someone insignificant to the war machine). This reading, in turn, sheds an added emotional dimension to our understanding of this 'farewell to Lesbia' poem.

From its consideration as a 'romantic travelogue' (Quinn 1970) to the excessive reach of the Roman Empire (Konstan 2000 & 2011, Shapiro 2012), the first part of the poem (lines 1-15) has invited scholars to find a connection (or not) with the second part (lines 16-24) where the speaker expounds his message about the girl's voracious and heartless love. Forsyth connects the two parts through the theme of sexual violence, whereas Shapiro through a theme of conquest, connecting *prati ultimi flos* ("the flower in the farthest meadow," lines 22-23) to *ultimos Britannos* (the farthest Britons, lines 11-12; Shapiro 2012: 43).

I suggest, however, that a connection can be made through the survey and takeover of large and significant imperial holdings narrowing down to the death of one insignificant human or flower. For while the adjective *ultimus* does appear to describe the land of Britain and the meadow, it is noteworthy that the '*flos*' itself (that which is cut down) is described as *in* or *of* the

'prati ultimi' in the locative. Catullus describes his love as the *'flos'* (lines 22-24), not as the meadow, and thus, the ravaging of a country cannot be a true analogy to the image of a love that is severed. Provinces that are conquered and retained for their wealth better parallel the *'trecentos moechis'* (the three hundred lovers) whom the girl embraces to grow stronger, loving none, and ripping apart their loins (lines 17-20). The flower, rather, stands for the destruction of an insignificant someone in the grand scheme of empire, someone of or in the meadow that is swept by the war machine. In this last part of the poem, Catullus highlights the damage conquest brings to the small and insignificant (a flower among many). While the earlier parts of the poem illustrate large groups of people and lands (the Arabs, the Gallic Rhine, the Britons, 'the monuments of great Caesar' (*Caesaris ... monimenta magni*, line 10), Catullus focuses, at the end, on the destruction of one small flower, a representation of his one little love that was dear.

Such a poem that illustrates imperialism and invasion demands to be revisited in these present times. The flower can carry a wide range of symbolism: here in Catullus 11 it may be Catullus' love, or any loved one cut down by an uncaring Empire, any Ukrainian, any Palestinian, or any Burmese oppressed by a ruthless junta. This paper highlights how a deeper reading of this Catullan image reveals a vivid illustration of war and the loss of love. Catullus 11, then, narrates not just a grand impersonal survey of peoples and provinces that the Empire swallows, but even the most personal death of an insignificant weed.

Select Bibliography

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