

Staging an Ekphrasis: Theatric Environment and Multimedia in Catullus 64

At first glance, Catullus' longest poem about the marriage of Peleus and Thetis feels like an extreme departure from much of the rest of the corpus, leaving behind the *quadriuiis et angiportis* (58.4) of Rome in favor of pre-Trojan War Pharsalus to tell a story of gods and heroes. If one moves past the subject matter, however, and focuses on the way in which the poet presents it, they will find that Catullus' 64th poem still feels tied to his Roman environment, albeit on a different level. In this paper I will show that through Catullus' blending of artistic media and emphasis on spectacle, he evokes the feeling of attending a Roman public festival, in which an attendee would experience art in various ways in a short amount of time, often culminating in the attendance of a theatric performance, represented here by the ekphrasis of Ariadne on the purple coverlet.

As my argument hinges on the environment and feeling evoked by this poem, and handles several non-verbal forms of art, my analysis features few instances of direct connection or close similarity in Catullus' text to other works of literature. Rather, my ancient evidence consists mostly of examples from Plautus to Pliny the Elder which give insight into the visual and aural experience of Roman *ludi*, which seem to have presented attendees with a feast for the eyes and ears unlike much of anything one might experience in daily life. I then analyze Catullus' poem in this context, showing how the poet evokes a similar sensory experience by forcing the reader to constantly picture new types of art in their mind. For example, fairly quickly after introducing the purple coverlet, Catullus describes his centerpiece Ariadne as an *effegies bacchantis* (64.59). One might imagine that a Roman may have had to make a similar

shift while making their way through the statue-lined portico of Pompey after viewing paintings or tapestries on display in a temple.

Past scholarship has had the tendency to focus on how Catullus 64 tries to escape the world established by the rest of the corpus (cf. Anderson, 1995). I hope that this approach provides a new way for scholars embrace the Roman elements of this poem and contextualize it within Catullus' time while still accounting for the obvious difference in register and subject matter. Studies in Catullus and his connection to Roman comedy have also seen major contributions in recent years (cf. Polt, 2021 and Hanses, 2020), and I hope this paper can shine light on yet another way in which Roman comedic theater functions in Catullus' poetry.

Bibliography

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