

The Hidden Springs of the Muses in Catullus 68

In *carmen* 68, a “prototype” for Latin erotic elegy (Solmsen 270), Catullus compares the hot tears that dampen his cheeks (55-56) to a stream (*perlucens... rivus*, 57-58) that leaps down (*prosilit*, 58) from the top of a mountain (*vertice montis*, 57) to provide sweet relief (*dulce... levamen*, 61) to an exhausted traveler (*viatori lasso in sudore*, 61). This *rivus* forms the central link in a chain of similes (53-66) that binds Catullus’ desire to commemorate Allius (41-52) to his description of Allius’ assistance (67-69; on the identity of the addressees of c. 68A & B, see Leigh). Although previous scholarship has attempted to elucidate this simile through intertextual references (e.g., Kowerski, Gale, and Vandiver), identification of the referents of this transitional simile has proven elusive (e.g., Fordyce *ad loc.* 57ff). Notable concerns include the transformation of Catullus’ burning tears of passion, initially compared to Aetna and Thermopylae (53-54), into a cooling stream, and the identity of the traveler who benefits from its waters. The *viator* has traditionally been equated with the poem’s addressee, Allius, or alternatively with Catullus as the recipient of Allius’ assistance, a reading that necessitates a mid-simile change in referent for the water (Catullus’ tears become Allius’ support for Catullus). In this paper, I propose a new metapoetic interpretation of Catullus’ *perlucens rivus* that integrates the simile into its proto-elegiac context and directly correlates Catullus’ erotic—and fraternal—grief to his composition of c. 68 through the mediating figure of the *domina* (68) turned Muse (*candida diva*, 70).

Carmen 68, is one of only four poems (35, 65, 68, 105) in which Catullus names the Muses (cf. Kowerski). The effect of their triple invocation in lines 7, 10, and 41 (*deae*) emphasizes the singular importance of this poem for the self-fashioning of the Catullan poetic

persona through his unrelenting association of poetic inspiration with love and grief. Building on the spatial turn exemplified by Lewis, who accentuates the importance of geographic locations in Catullus' long poems, I argue that the *perlucens rivus* descends from an amalgamation of the springs of the Muses—Hippocrene, Castalia, Pieria—any of which satisfy the loose geophysical details of the simile. By understanding the *rivus* as the waters of poetic inspiration, the *viator* of line 61 therefore becomes none other than Catullus *qua* extradiegetic poet (note the echo of *dulci... carmine Musae, 7*, in *dulce... levamen*), drinking inspiration from his own intradiegetic *persona's* tears. I therefore contend that Catullus' *rivus* simile invokes his *persona's* erotic and fraternal grief as his source of inspiration. In this cyclical movement from divine spring to poetic inspiration, Catullus echoes and inverts Hesiod, whose Muses began their flowing (ἐπερρώσαντο, *Th. 7*) journey upward to Olympus from the top of Helikon (ἀκροτάτῳ Ἑλικῶνι, *Th. 7*) before circling back down the mountain (Ἑλικῶνος ὑπὸ ζαθέοιο, *Th. 23*) to deliver their epiphanic poetic commission to Hesiod.

Catullus' situation of poetic inspiration in the love and grief of his *persona's* experiences strongly foreshadows the narrative premise that underlies Latin erotic elegy. The dream-like epiphany of Catullus' *domina*, commonly identified as Lesbia, that directly follows this sequence of similes (*candida diva, 70*; cf. 133-134) further situates poetic inspiration in c. 68 in the person of the elegiac *puella*. This assimilation of Muse and mistress speaks not only to Catullus' "tendency... to blur the line between lived reality and comparative exemplars" (Lewis 2019, 1393), but also, through c. 68's amalgamation of commemorative and funereal elegy (Kowerski 414-415), to the new genre—Latin erotic elegy—that ultimately derives from it. Catullus thus reconfigures the grief that earlier in c. 68A prevented his composition of a poem (*muneraque et*

Musarum... et Veneris, 10) for Mallius (following Leigh 224) into the inspiration for a new type of poetry.

Works Cited

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