

“Cheeks not Unstained:” Simonides’ “Danaë” (fr. 543) and Catullus 38 Reconsidered

Catullus 38 has received relatively scant scholarly attention compared to other *carmina*. In this poem, Catullus reprimands his friend Cornificius for disregarding his intense emotional pain before requesting an *allocutio* – words of emotional consolation – from Cornificius to soothe him. Catullus stipulates, however, a specific kind of response: something “sadder than Simonidean tears” (*maestius lacrimis Simonideis*). Most scholars have taken this poem’s invocation of Simonides at face value; his *threnoi* for dead soldiers were famously morose. Kowerski (2008) performed a full treatment of the poem in which he analyzed Catullus 38 in conversation not with Simonides’ *threnoi*, but rather with a narrative Simonidean poem, fr. 11W. Building on Kowerski’s expert approach of analyzing Catullus 38 in conversation with a narrative Simonidean fragment, I also offer a narrative Simonides poem — fr. 543, Simonides’ “Danaë” — as another suitable literary model for Catullus’ request for something “sadder than Simonidean tears.”

Simonides fr. 543 narrates Danaë’s plight as she and her infant Perseus float in a small wooden chest on the ocean, condemned to death by Acrisius because of a prophecy that Perseus would kill him. Lovingly embracing Perseus, Danaë expresses her grief and laments his fate. She then lulls him to sleep and prays to Zeus that he might spare them from ruin. In terms of literary aesthetics, this poem would have certainly appealed to Catullus and the Neoterics. As evidenced in Alexandrian poetry and epyllia like Catullus 64, the Neoterics were interested in exploring well-known myths from the novel perspective of the heroine figure and giving that heroine a voice, as is done in this Simonides poem. Also from Alexandrian poetry is the emphasis on poetic toil and concision, which *δαίδαλέα* (v. 2), *πόνον* (v. 7), and the famously Callimachean

λεπτόν (v. 20) would all evoke in the minds of the Neoterics. Finally, just like their Alexandrian predecessors, the Neoterics loved to make obscure references that only their learned friends would notice; Simonides' description of Danaë's tears via litotes in this poem exemplifies such a recondite, specific reference.

In terms of poetic content, this poem clearly exhibits the Simonidean sadness Catullus is invoking and responding to, as Danaë's maternal anxiety is only compounded by Perseus' inability to comfort his mother as an infant. There are multiple other parallels between Simonides' poem and that of Catullus. First, this fragment provides a direct *locus* for Catullus' *lacrimis Simonideis* since Danaë is ...οὐκ ἀδιάντοισι παρειαῖς (v. 5), with Simonides vividly painting her as a tragic figure like Catullus paints Ariadne in c.64. Second, Danaë's words of consolation to Perseus evoke the emotional *allocutio* Catullus asks Cornificius to compose for him; unlike the silent Perseus to Danaë, however, the angered Catullus makes his distress directly known to Cornificius, with Cornificius instead resembling the baby untroubled by the words of his addressor. Last, Catullus' request for even a morsel of consolation from Cornificius, *minimum facillimumquest* (38.4) and *paulum quid lubet allocutionis* (38.7), echoes Danaë's request to Perseus: ...ἐμῶν ῥημάτων / λεπτόν ὑπεῖχες οὔαζ (vv. 19-20), as Catullus and Danaë both focus on the smallness (*minimum, paulum, λεπτός*) of their requests and thereby emphasize their desperation for their addressees to listen to them.

Via these intertextual parallels, Simonides' lachrymose Danaë thus emerges as an apt model for Catullus in poem 38. What Catullus and Danaë ultimately want is a sign that their words have been heard. Danaë – who would otherwise be voiceless if not for Simonides as poet giving her speech – wants at least one of two signs, either one from Perseus that her words of consolation have brought him peace, or one from Zeus that her prayers have, at the very least,

been received by the gods. Likewise, Catullus wants a sign – preferably in the form of a poetic *allocutio* – from Cornificius that his plea has been heard and understood by his friend. Danaë believes that, if she goes unheard, she and Perseus will die. Similarly, Catullus believes that, if his request goes unanswered by his friend, it is a sign that he is no longer part of the Neoteric system of literary exchange which constitutes his only real tether to Roman society. Thus, he as a poet would, in essence, die. With this model, Catullus elevates his emotional plight to the level of Danaë's and reveals the gravity of his situation.

Select Bibliography

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