

The Self-Abandoning Maiden: Focalization of Attis' Speeches in Catullus 63

Catullus 63 is often called the strangest classical Latin poem (Clay 1995; Harrison 2004); composed in the rare galliambic meter, it tells the story of Attis, who castrates himself in a religious frenzy, then wakes up the next day to regret his own actions. In this paper, I consider his two speeches: the first, in which he leads a group of fellow eunuch-priests in worship of the goddess Cybele; and the second, in which he laments his status as outcast from Greek society. The two speeches show strikingly different approaches to how he narrates his own actions and the actions of other people. By applying a narratological approach, I address how the focalization of these two speeches supports the central "problem" of Attis, and of the archetype of the abandoned maiden: his separation from his native society.

While the ordering of Catullus' poems is always a contentious topic, c. 63 can be seen in dialogue with c. 61 and c. 64, regardless of the exact original sequence of these three poems. The first speech of Attis, in which he leads his band of fellow eunuchs to worship their goddess with music and dancing, is particularly reminiscent of c. 61; both rely heavily on imperative and jussive verb forms to express narrative sequence, with the command to take an action indicating that the action is incipient or even already underway. Conversely, the second speech of Attis recalls (or anticipates) the speech of the abandoned Ariadne in c. 64's extended ekphrasis. Both use the standard elements of the speech of an abandoned maiden in tragedy (Wheeler 1934), in which the tragic figure laments how she came to such a fate and her isolation from her former community. Just as c. 61 and c. 64 deal with maidens who are no longer waiting at home for marriage, Attis too is presented as a female figure detached from home; he bears more in common with the "ruined" Ariadne than the bride of c. 61, though in his case it was his symbolic marriage to a goddess that ruined him.

However, the speeches of Attis hold a peculiar relationship to the usual bridal or tragic maiden figures, because he is the person abducting or ruining himself, rather than being acted on by a different heroic/godly male character. The poem indicates this most starkly in its use of feminine adjectives and nouns for Attis after his autocastration, but the speeches also highlight this odd dual position that Attis plays, as abductor/abducted, ruiner/ruined, sexual aggressor and maiden. As the one who voices the speeches, Attis is allowed a less removed focalizer status than the usual third person protagonist of a Roman narrative poem. He speaks directly, and he speaks of himself. The act of self-description creates a gap between the describer and the described. (Bal 2017) By describing his previous inclusion in specific social structures, lamenting his current status, and wondering what future actions or options he may have, Attis emphasizes that gap between speaking self and described self, and thus between present self and past self.

This paper demonstrates that Attis' speeches emphasize his isolation from society and his own role in his ruined/abandoned status in a manner impossible for a conventional narrator. By taking on the role of narrator, Attis calls his increasing detachment from the rest of society--and from himself--into sharp focus.

Bibliography

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