

Ariadne, *Figura Variata*: The Unconventional Ecphrasis in Catullus 64

Unlike earlier descriptions of art objects, such as Homer's shield of Achilles (*Il.*18.558-720) or Vergil's shield of Aeneas (*Aen.* 8.617-731), the wedding coverlet of Peleus and Thetis in Catullus 64 is by all measures an unconventional ecphrasis. There are no references to the coverlet after the opening lines of the ecphrasis (64.50-51) nor is there any reference at all to the skill of the craftsman who created it. What results from Catullus' breach of these ecphrastic conventions is "an ecphrasis full of movement and sound ... [one] that goes far beyond what could be inferred simply from looking at a picture" (Trimble 2009).

Catullus' ecphrasis does surpass the limits of art, an aspect of the poem that has prompted scholars such as Fordyce and Putnam to suggest that Catullus forgets himself in the ecphrasis and loses sight of the purpose of the literary device. But this is clearly not the case. Rather, the poet deliberately gives his Ariadne stage directions and a script or *oratio recta* (64.132-201). In so doing, Catullus explores Ariadne's past relationship with Theseus, her present abandonment, and her future salvation, the *pathos* of which cannot be conveyed by images alone. Looking more closely at the way Catullus constructs his ecphrasis and building upon the work of Elsner and Corte, I question the traditional view that wedding coverlet of Catullus 64 contained three to five scenes. On the contrary, I argue that we are to imagine just one scene on the *vestis*: Ariadne gazing out from the shore of Dia (53-57). In this reading of the ecphrasis, the literary version of Ariadne's abandonment by Theseus begins to resemble the single-scene wall-paintings of that same myth (Laird 1993).

To support this new interpretation, I show that Catullus clearly marks his narrative digressions from the description of the coverlet with verbs of storytelling. Shortly after describing Ariadne on the beach (64.50-75), for example, Catullus signals his departure from the

vestis: “For they say that once, forced by a cruel plague to expiate the slaughter of Androgeos, Cecrops was giving chosen youths and a group of unmarried maidens as a feast to the Minotaur,”
nam perhibent olim crudeli peste coactam / Androgeoneae poenas exsolvere caedis / electos iuvenes simul et decus innuptarum / Cecropiam solitam esse dapem dare Minotauro (64.76-79).
Perhibent, “they say,” indicates that the narrator is undoing the ecphrastic pause of the coverlet’s description. In other words, Catullus moves away from the initial, ecphrastic scene of Ariadne gazing out at the sea to narrate the history of the Ariadne’s relationship with Theseus (64.71-115).

There are two further instances where Catullus signals his departure from his initial ecphrastic description with verbs of storytelling (*perhibent, ferunt*). These narrative digressions into Ariadne’s past and future, respectively, shift the reader’s attention away from the materiality of the *vestis* itself and blur the focus on the wedding coverlet of Thetis and Peleus as such. What results is a more focalized Ariadne, one who is both the subject of the image on the wedding coverlet, as well as the filter through which the reader perceives Ariadne’s oscillating emotional state. Ariadne, it turns out -- not the *vestis* -- is the *figura variata* of the ecphrasis.

Bibliography:

Bussels, Stijin. *The Animated Image: Roman Theory on Naturalism, Vividness and Divine Power*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012.

Catullus. *Carmina*. ed. Roger Mynors. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1958.

Corte, José Carlos Fernández. *Catulo: Poesías*. Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 2006.

DeBrohun, J.B. “Ariadne and the Whirlwind of Fate: Figures of Confusion in Catullus 64.149-57.” *Classical Philology*. Vol. 94. 1999: 419-30.

- Elsner, Jas. "Viewing Ariadne: From Ekphrasis to Wall Painting in the Roman World." *Classical Philology*. Vol. 102. 2007: 20-44.
- Fernandelli, Marco. *Catullo e la Rinascita dell' Epos: dal carme 64 all' Eneide*. Georg Olms Verlag Hildesheim: New York, 2012.
- Laird, Andrew. "Sounding out Ecphrasis: Art and Text in Catullus 64." *Roman Studies*. Vol. 83. 1993: 18-30.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*. Vol. 16. 1975, 6-18.
- Plett, Heinrich. "Ekphrasis of Places and Pictures." *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age: The Aesthetics of Evidence*. London: Brill, 2012.
- Rees, R. "Common Sense in Catullus 64." *The American Journal of Philology*. Vol. 115. 1994: 75-88.
- Trimble, Gail. "Catullus and the Tragedy of Ariadne." *Mosaïque*. 1 Juin 2009. 1-19.
- Visualizing the Tragic: Drama, Myth and Ritual in Greek Art and Literature*. ed. Kraus, Goldhill, Foley and Elsner. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.
- Webb, Ruth. "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of Genre." *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry*. Vol. 15. 1999: 7-18.