The Rhetoric of Ariadne and the Construction of the Catullan *Ego*

In this paper, I explore the identity of the poetic voice in Catullus 64. My analysis of Catullus' ekphrasis, which occupies the majority of the poem, uses both a rhetorical and semiotic lens to observe how the poetic voice challenges conventions of narration. In particular, Catullus uses the first person in his ekphrastic narration, which is a rare usage in epic poetry outside prefatory invocations. Line 116f. reads, "Sed quid ego a primo digressus carmine plura / commemorem…" I argue that *digressus* positions the identity of the Catullan *ego* in a rhetorical role.

Ekphrasis is at its core a rhetorical device. Following Webb's (2009) seminal work on the subject, I note that the ancients did not adhere to the modern definition of ekphrasis as a poetic description of a work of art, but as a rhetorical exercise describing any object. Conversely, as Lucian's *Hall* and Philostratus' *Eikones* demonstrate, rhetoric could be ekphrastic in practice. Concomitant with the obfuscation of "rhetoric" and "poetry" by Catullus and his contemporaries is the additional muddying of the delineations between the categories of "description" and "narrative": rhetorical manuals from the period suggest that these categories are fundamentally connected vehicles of communication.

It is no surprise, then, that Catullus links his poetic voice, the *ego*, with *digressus*, a rhetorical term. I explore the use of *digressio* in both contemporary and subsequent progymnasmata, where it is a specific kind of rhetorical device meant to evince *pathos* in the audience. In poetic usage, however, *digressio* is conspicuously rare. A prominent exception is Vergil's *Georgics* III.300, where Varro is taking the role of *magistratus agri*, thereby performing a similar role as Catullus' *ego* and making the rhetorical reference explicit.

The identification of the poetic voice with rhetoric is also verified at line 164, where Ariadne quotes verbatim the Catullan *ego* at line 116 with "sed quid ego." Arresting as this may be—how can observed art mimic the observer?—I emphasize that Ariadne occupies a substantial portion of the ekphrasis with her own direct speech, her diatribe against Theseus. Although Roman society had little space for female rhetoricians, Ariadne's speech shows remarkable affinity to Roman female oratory as it exists in the mouth of the elegiac *puella*, who, as in the case of Cynthia in Propertius 1.3, makes an impassioned speech decrying her lover. As Gardner (2007) emphasises, Ariadne is reminiscent of the elegiac *puella*; the Catullan *ego*, by linking himself to Ariadne, hints to his own performance of the *puella*'s rhetoric.

Kristevan semiotics provides further enlightenment into the identity of the Catullan *ego*. In the "Revolution in Poetic Language" (1974) and in "Women's Time" (1981), Kristeva identifies male and female subjectivity in the creation of meaning. Male subjectivity is characterized by linear, horizontal chronology, while female subjectivity is self-reflexive and cyclical. I argue that *digressio*, as a circuitous, achronological parenthesis, is a performance of female subjectivity, parallel with the identification of the poetic voice with Ariadne. This is in contrast to the *egressio* of Theseus at 64.74, whose motion away from Ariadne is linear and purpose-driven. This is strengthened by Theseus' *egressio* "e labyrintheis flexibus" at 64.114, where he is described as trying to escape the tangled labyrinth, a metaphor for ekphrasis itself. Conspicuously, Ariadne is literally standing out on the coverlet: besides the metapoetic emergence from the waves (water being a traditional uterine image for epic poetry), she is actually hindering the linear progress of the poem which we have been awaiting since the Argonautic opening lines. This interruption, in turn, illustrates the action of the narrative voice himself: as Fowler (1991) declares, "Verbal description has to take a stand."

This paper, then, unifies several lines of thought in current understandings of ekphrasis. Catullus 64 is firmly grounded in the epic and elegiac traditions, yet is equally dependent on the rhetorical construction of ekphrasis as understood by his contemporaries; contemporary semiotics provide a further lens in which we may understand the Catullan *ego*. In the end, we see that in C. 64, Catullus is consistent in his commitment to subverting all categories: those of genre, narration, and gender, and how deftly he is able to accomplish all at once.

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