

## Anti-Epithalamial Imagery in Catullus 17

A hallmark feature of ancient wedding-songs is their use of *eikasia*, comparison of bride and groom to something conventionally praiseworthy and suitable to their idealized gender roles, especially cultivated plants (flowers, fruits, and trees) and domestic animals (Hague 1983, Fedeli 1983, Swift 2010). As Feeney (1992) observes, Catullus was sensitive to the special relationship between *epithalamia* and analogies; indeed, twenty-eight of the thirty-two similes in his corpus appear in poems that feature or allude to weddings. One group of such epithalamial comparisons that has gone unexplored, however, occurs in poem 17, where Catullus criticizes a husband who fails to fulfill an essential obligation of Roman men, namely satisfying his wife sexually. In this paper I argue Catullus employs comparisons of plants and animals familiar from wedding-songs to portray poem 17's husband and wife, but his analogies here flip these traditional epithalamial *topoi* on their heads. The poet reworks the positive floral and faunal imagery by which bride and groom are usually praised, subverting them to underscore the unproductive status of poem 17's marriage.

When he introduces poem 17's wife for the first time, Catullus calls her “a bride, a girl in the freshest flower... who has to be watched more carefully than the darkest grapes” (*viridissimo nupta flore puella... adservanda nigerrimis diligentius uvis*, 14–16). The comparison of brides to fruit can be traced back as far as Sappho (e.g., fr.105aL-P), and indeed elsewhere Catullus likens ideal brides to grapevines that twine around elm trees and bear fruit (62.49–58). But if poem 17's wife is an *exemplum* of marital beauty and productivity, her husband is another story altogether. Catullus likens him to a ““an alder lying in a ditch, hamstrung by a Ligurian axe” (*velut alnus / in fossa Liguri iacet supernata securi*, 18–19). Wedding-songs often compare grooms to trees (e.g., ὄρπακι βραδίνῳ, “slender sapling” at Sappho fr.115L-P; *ulmus maritus*, “husband elm” at

Catullus 62.54), but these are vigorous specimens, never dead trunks. Khan (1969) observes the image of the felled alder hints at the man's impotence; in conjunction with the comparison of his wife to grapes, it also suggests he has failed to support her in reproducing fruitfully.

*Epithalamia* also compare bride and groom to domesticated animals, and Catullus inverts these images in much the same way as he does the plant analogies. Swift (2010) notes that yoked and herd animals are especially evocative comparanda for women, since marriage vocabulary in both Greek and Latin draws strongly on metaphors from animal husbandry. Catullus follows this tradition, calling poem 17's wife "friskier than a tender itty bitty kid" (*tenellulo delicatior haedo*, 15). She falls into the same general class as other ideal brides, then, but her husband's inattention has pushed her dangerously beyond normal epithalamial bounds. Quinn (1969) points out "goats were proverbial for their amorousness," and kids in particular appear throughout Latin poetry as symbols of sexual excitability (e.g., Horace *Odes* 3.13). The danger of her straying is underlined by Catullus' choice of animals with which to compare her husband. Normally in wedding-songs, grooms are likened to stallions (e.g., Sappho fr.117aL-P), but poem 17's husband is "like a she-mule who's lost her iron shoe in the clinging mire" (*ferream ut soleam tenaci in voragine mula*, 26). The mule's gender is particularly significant: she-mules were especially valued in antiquity because they were more submissive to their masters (Adams 1993), so the husband is portrayed in epithalamial terms more appropriate to brides, while his wife is given the energetic traits that are expected of husbands. The mule's sterility also stresses the relationship's main dysfunction: it is failing to result in children, thereby undermining the point of the marriage.

By likening bride and groom to garden plants and farm animals, the *epithalamia* convey fertility and mutual benefit, both between the marital partners and between the family unit and society, as the implicit goals of the wedding. Catullus' inversion of epithalamial comparisons in

poem 17 hints that the relationship's problem is not only sex, but also a failure to reproduce and contribute to the town's community.

### Bibliography

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