

The Mute Callimachus: Silencing An Intertext in Catullus 65

Catullus 65 is a preface to his adaptation of a famous passage of the *Aetia*, the *Coma Berenices*, in which the stolen lock of Berenice's hair is transformed into a constellation. The poem apologizes to its addressee, the orator Hortensius, for Catullus' inability to write original verse because of his grief over his lost brother. It is appropriate, then, that Callimachean references structure at least part of this brief elegy, since it serves to preface an extended translation of Callimachus. The poem ends with a simile that is often believed (see Hunter 1993; Kroll 1989: 198-99; Young 2015: 155) to refer to Callimachus' story of Acontius and Cydippe; there have, however, been occasional objections (Syndikus 1990: 197-98) and more complex interpretation than usual (Skinner 2003: 15-18; Stroup 2010: 85). Yet a crucial difference between the Catullan simile and its Callimachean model has been neglected and stands to tell us much: Callimachus' story revolves around speech, but Catullus' is notable for silence.

Catullus describes his embarrassment over the translation he has sent with a simile in which a young woman, surprised by her mother's arrival, stands up and lets an apple fall where her mother can see it. Apples are traditional love offerings, and the girl blushes since her mother now knows she has a suitor and that the time of her girlhood is drawing to a close. The most famous literary example of such a gift is the apple that Acontius inscribes and throws at the feet of Cydippe. Since reading aloud was the norm, the inscribed apple tricks the recipient into speaking the words Acontius has written, "I, Cydippe, swear to marry Acontius." Cydippe's girlhood too is ended by the gift of the apple, because of her unwitting oath.

Yet Catullus' simile is marked by the silence of the activity. The girl swears no oath that we can hear, and her blush reveals her emotions. This makes sense when we consider that the

poem is an apology for the inability to write original verse, that is, to speak in one's own voice. Yet the silence of the simile also invites us to reflect on the relationship of Catullan poetics to those of Callimachus and Alexandria. The apple that inspires speech and binds a young woman to a future marriage has become a silent revelation of private emotions. The lengthy translation of Callimachus (c. 66) that follows deals with the very public transition of a woman at the height of political power. Catullus is not a court poet and the marriages that his longer poems describe may be a matter of the wealthy but not of the truly powerful. The learning of the Alexandrian courtier is pressed into service in poems like Catullus 67 and 68 not to describe the scandals of court or the power of a queen but to explore the messy realities of private life. Callimachus' speaking apple seals what is to be a public matrimonial bond; the unscribed apple of Catullus' silent simile points to that model in order to introduce us to a more ambiguous set of relationships that the poet's words can only imperfectly express.

Bibliography

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