

Love and Other Gods: Catullan Theology and Subjectivity

This essay attempts to construct the rudiments of a Catullan theology, a conception of the gods and their relationship to mortals based not on the concerns of the Roman state or people, but rather on the individualized interior subjectivity and overpowering desire characteristic of Catullus' corpus (cf. Janan 1994). According to this theology, divinity consists primarily in the ability to directly affect and control interiority and desire, a power that can be harnessed for both constructive and destructive purposes. On the one hand, the power of the gods is at least potentially capable of being used constructively, to control and reconcile desire and so form lasting social bonds among multiple subjects (cf. Thomsen 1992). On the other hand, this same power can be used, by means of unrestrained desire, to destabilize and destroy social bonds, undercut identity, and dissolve the subject entirely (cf. Strauss 1995). Ultimately, the imagined constructive role of the gods is called into question throughout the Catullan corpus, where an image is repeatedly presented of capricious deities who are, perhaps, the very source of the destructive desire they are called upon to control, or who at least cannot be trusted to reliably use their power to help subjects and society rather than destroy them. This theology, I argue, ties into the larger project of Catullus' corpus, presenting a vision of the Roman masculine self and society in a state of collapse.

Bibliography

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