CATULLUS 64: THE GAME OF NAMES

by

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The abundance of themes in Catullus' famous poem is astounding: the journey, love, time, memory, war, death, bliss and mourning, the wedding and the funeral, men and gods... And it cannot pass unnoticed that these diverse threads are connected together by specific bonds of divergences, ambivalence, and similarities emphasised by some recurring motifs, such as images of the sea, uprooted trees, slain bulls or the contrasted colours of white and red[1]. There are numerous considerations relating to the very structural pattern of the whole poem as well; scholars and readers use the metaphors of a labyrinth[2] (or a dream-like labyrinth[3]), a mirror[4], a ring[5], a Chinese box[6], and fractals[7]. They have also divided the poem into seven parts (or

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[1]   On *poikilia* in poem 64 see F. Klingner, *Catulls Peleus-Epos*, in: idem, *Studien zur griechischen und römischen Literatur*, Zürich 1964, pp. 213–216. Cf. also G.W. Most, *On the Arrangement of Catullus' Carmina Maiora*, Philologus CXXV 1981, p. 120. For other examples of diversity in the poem see, e.g., D. Konstan, *Catullus' Indictment of Rome: The Meaning of Catullus 64*, Amsterdam 1977, pp. 89–99 (chapter IX: "Some Imagery: Flowers, Trees, Wind and Light"); J.M. Duban, *Verbal Links and Imagistic Undercurrent in Catullus 64*, Latomus XXXIX 1980, pp. 777–802.

[2]   See J.H. Gaisser, *Threads in the Labyrinth: Competing Views and Voices in Catullus 64*, AJPh CXVI 1995, pp. 579–616; E. Theodorakopulos, *Catullus 64: Footsteps in the Labyrinth*, in: A.R. Sharrock (ed.), *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman Textual Relations*, Oxford 2000, pp. 115–141; M. Schmale, *Bilderreigen und Erzähllabyrinth. Catulls Carmen 64*, München–Leipzig 2004, esp. pp. 42 f. One may even notice some textual bends in that labyrinth: the first turn in the plot, for instance, is marked by the extremely strong poetical effect of triple anaphora and polyptoton in lines 19–21 (on which see J. Evrard-Gillis, *La récurrence lexicale dans l'œuvre de Catulle: étude stylistique*, Paris 1976, pp. 201 f.).

[3]   See Ch. Higgins, *In Love's Labyrinth*, The Guardian, 6 Oct. 2007 (http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/oct/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview34).

[4]   See Klingner, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 207.

[5]   See D.A. Traill, *Ring-Composition in Catullus 64*, CJ LXXVI 1981, pp. 232–241.

[6]   See D.F.S. Thomson, *Catullus. Edited with a Textual and Interpretative Commentary*, Toronto 1997, p. 387.

[7]   See Theodorakopulos, *op. cit.* (n. 2), p. 120.

more), mentioning the structure of a diptych (even with the axis of symmetry) and a triptych or cyclic/concentric composition[8]. All these different observations and interpretations have at least one feature in common; namely, they provide encouragement to seek further hidden associations and symmetries in the text of the Catullan epyllion. It seems, however, that one kind of linkage concerning the main characters of the poem has not yet been remarked upon.

The poem describes three main "marriage" stories in three different time dimensions (the present time of Peleus and Thetis associated with the apparently older[9] story of Theseus and Ariadne as well as with the prophecy about the future fate of Achilles and Polyxena); one of these relationships seems to be successful, while the other two are not. A supernatural being is significantly involved in the first of these, while the latter two are uniformly "human" (Achilles is of course a semi-divine being, but in the world Catullus creates, the hero's eminently human traits are decisive[10]).

One may think about some kind of gradation here: the couples described in the poem are in turn good, worse and, finally, the worst; it is indeed hard to envision a more lurid metaphor of a disastrous relationship than the image of the beheaded corpse of a young woman lying next to the tomb. This is chronologically the last of the poem's affairs and the one that was the least prosperous of all; in fact, it was completely "lifeless" from the beginning because it does not even come into effect until the death of the groom[11]. Other recurrent motifs are ordered according to a similar rule of gradation, above all the motif of nude breasts (which features in the cheerful encounter of Thetis and sea nymphs with the ship[12], then the helpless Ariadne, and at the end mourning mothers) as well

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[8]   See THOMSON, *op. cit.* (n. 6), p. 387.

[9]   Problems with the chronology of mythical events in the poem are a subject of persistent debate; for a sketch of the issue and a possible explanation, see C. WEBER, *Two Chronological Contradictions in Catullus 64*, TAPhA CXIII 1983, pp. 263–271. Other ways of dealing with the controversial chronological scheme can be found in S.G.P. SMALL, *Catullus: A Reader's Guide to the Poems*, Lanham–London 1983, pp. 178 f., n. 8. Cf. also D. FEENEY, *Caesar's Calendar: Ancient Time and the Beginnings of History*, Berkeley 2007, pp. 123–127 (subsection "Catullus's Chronological Anomie"); J.J. O'HARA, *Inconsistency in Roman Epic. Studies in Catullus, Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid and Lucan*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 34–41. This question will be addressed below.

[10]   According to the particularly telling comments made by D.P. HARMON (*Nostalgia for the Age of Heroes in Catullus 64*, Latomus XXXII 1973, p. 325), "Achilles, the fulfilment of human and divine hopes, will incarnate aspirations toward unity between men and gods. But the worst of the heroic ideal gets the upper hand in this exceptional child born to excel and be 'best'".

[11]   On the sacrifice of Polyxena on Achilles' grave styled in Catullus 64 as a kind of marriage, see E.E. BEYERS, *The Refrain in the Song of the Fates in Catullus C. 64 (v. 323–381)*, AClass III 1960, pp. 86–89; L. CURRAN, *Catullus 64 and the Heroic Age*, YClS XXI 1969, p. 189. For this concept as a Hellenistic invention, see D.D. HUGHES, *Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece*, London 1991, p. 62.

[12]   On this topic, see CURRAN, *op. cit.* (n. 11), p. 188; J. GRIFFIN, *Latin Poets and Roman Life*, Chapel Hill 1986, p. 93 (chapter V: "The Pleasures of Water and Nakedness"); R. HUNTER, *'Breast is Best': Catullus 64.18*, CQ XLI 1991, pp. 254 f.

as red/white colours (symbolising and describing, respectively, the glamour of the matrimonial bed at Peleus' palace, the grief of Ariadne, the grotesque group of the Parcae and finally Polyxena's ruthless death)[13]. Besides, not only are the distinctions between mortal and immortal similarly styled, but also those between the human and the monstrous: in the first part of the poem, the monstrosity is only alluded to by labelling the Argo ship as *monstrum* ("marvel", but also "monster"; 15), the second part comprises a struggle between a man (Theseus) and a genuine monster (i.e. the Minotaur, called *monstrum* again; 101)[14], and in the final part it is Achilles who becomes a kind of monster through his mass-murdering of innocent youngsters – just like the Minotaur himself.

But the intriguing and so far unnoticed part of the Catullan *tour de force* is the fact that the above couples are linked together not only by the progress of the narrative and, additionally, by the abrupt leap made by the Parcae in their song (from nuptial praise to the martial scenes of the Trojan war and from the cruel episode of Polyxena back again to the wedding), but also by means of some textual signs, specifically the initials of the names of the protagonists: **P**eleus/**Th**etis – **Th**eseus/**A**riadne – **A**chilles/**P**olyxena[15]. This strange game of initials plays with the very idea of (different) beginnings, the idea that is undoubtedly crucial to the understanding of the poem.

The first letter of Polyxena's name seemingly leads to the beginning of the story by pointing at Peleus. Can it also be understood as moving Polyxena back to the beginning? If so, it can once more disturb the order of events in the story, but at the same time may solve some chronological problems. Let us see how it works. Accepting Feeney's reading of the poem, one may safely conjecture that in 64 Catullus attempts to establish the starting point of chronology (the very first recognisable moment in the human history) in a decisive way, taking into consideration different solutions known from the Greek tradition. As Feeney claims,

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[13]   On the red/white contrast in 64, see Curran, *op. cit.* (n. 11), p. 190; Harmon, *op. cit.* (n. 10), pp. 324 f.; Ph.L. Thomas, *Red and White: A Roman Color Symbol*, RhM CXXII 1979, pp. 313 f.; J. Clarke, *Imagery of Colour and Shining in Catullus, Propertius and Horace*, New York 2003, pp. 113 f., 129 and 131.

[14]   On the "monstrosity" of the ship, see Feeney, *op. cit.* (n. 9), p. 123.

[15]   On a smaller scale, Catullus employed similar effect in his poem 68, where an affinity of two people, Laodamia and Lesbia, is suggested by the initials being identical. See C.W. Macleod, *A Use of Myth in Ancient Poetry (Cat. 68; Hor. Od. III, 27; Theoc. 7; Prop. III, 15)*, CQ XXIV 1974, pp. 83–86; cf. also R. Whitaker, *Myth and Personal Experience in Roman Love-Elegy. A Study in Poetic Technique*, Göttingen 1983, pp. 60 f. Wiseman, however, believes that Laodamia in poem 68 can be compared with Catullus himself; see T.P. Wiseman, *Catullus and His World: A Reappraisal*, Cambridge 1985, p. 176. An analogous idea occurs later on also in Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis* 3; although the connection is alphabetical (**A**ugurinus – **B**aba – **C**laudius), the context looks quite similar, because we are dealing here, as in Catullus 64, with trichotomy, Parcae and spindles (*fusi*). More generally on the "decorative" way Catullus deploys proper nouns in poem 64, involving euphony and the specific rhythm of repetitions, see M. Geymonat, *Onomastica decorativa nel carme LXIV di Catullo*, M&D VII 1982, pp. 173–175.

[h]ere we see Catullus enacting the phenomenal difficulty of reaching back to
a definitively originary moment. Such moments can appear definitive and sharp,
but they are always blurred on closer inspection and less primary than they appear
at first[16].

In contrast to FEENEY, however, I would argue that after reassessing some
Greek "originary moments", connected, as he explains, with the mythic con-
quest of the sea (Argo, the Minoan thalassocracy, the Cretan quest of Theseus),
Catullus does fix on one real point of departure for (particularly Roman) chro-
nology: the fall of Troy. The idea can be tracked back to Eratosthenes, but was
accepted by Roman poets as early as in the time of Naevius[17]. In some other
poems (65, 68, 101) Catullus elaborates the Trojan theme as part of his private
history related to the death of his brother in the Troad, yet in this case it is uni-
versal history that is certainly at stake. Additionally, the *truncum corpus* (370)
of the Trojan Polyxena introduces, perhaps for the first time in Roman poetry
(albeit implicitly), the idea of *caput* as a symbol of a town, adopted subsequently
by Vergil in his description of the traumatic beginnings of Roman history in the
Trojan scenes of the *Aeneid*[18].

What other consequences (if any) for the reading of the whole poem could
this pattern of joined initials have? Firstly, the letters establishing the link be-
tween Polyxena and Peleus highlight the "cyclical" features of the poem. As we
can see now, these features are strikingly placed on different levels of the text;
the "ring" pattern lurks everywhere, not only within the very structure of the
poem, within the refrains of the song of the Parcae, or within the imagery of
recurrence and surrounding (which consists, e.g., of waves, a whirlwind, clothes
wrapped around the body, an arm around the neck, weaving and spinning) – but
also among the poetic effects concerning games with letters. It is interesting to
observe that the main characters in this "chain of beings" are often engaged in
some "minor circles" which are part of the intricate plot which resembles a vi-
cious circle or, to use an equally appropriate word here, a labyrinth. For instance,
Ariadne forgets (in a way) her father, then Theseus forgets Ariadne, and in the
end, Theseus forgets his father's admonitions and so brings death on him[19]. The
idea of different "circular connections" between the protagonists is apparently
something we are encouraged to constantly think of when reading the poem.

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[16]   FEENEY, *op. cit.* (n. 9), p. 125.

[17]   See, e.g., L. CANFORA, *L'inizio della storia secondo i Greci*, QS XXXIII 1991, pp. 16–18.
Cf. also FEENEY, *op. cit.* (n. 9), pp. 82–84.

[18]   On Troy as the 'beheaded' city in connection with Priam's decapitation in the *Aeneid*, see
E.N. GENOVESE, *Deaths in the Aeneid*, Pacific Coast Philology X 1975, pp. 22 f.; R.J. SKLENAR,
The Death of Priam: Aeneid 2.506–558, Hermes CXVIII 1990, pp. 67–75; A.M. BOWIE, *The Death
of Priam. Allegory and History in the Aeneid*, CQ XL 1990, pp. 470–481.

[19]   See TRAILL, *op. cit.* (n. 5), pp. 135 f.; SCHMALE, *op. cit.* (n. 2), pp. 191–199.

Secondly, the "initials-game" allows us to see those three main stories in the poem as a single story, or, more exactly, as three phases of the same story. Not inevitably, yet rather naturally, it leads us to the interpretation that sees incessant allusions to Catullus' own changeable relationship with Clodia-Lesbia in Catullus' mythological poetry[20]. Ariadne in particular, being the embodiment of the famous motto *odi et amo* (as Theseus' lover and, at the same time, an originator of the curses against him), is regarded as a character with whom Catullus' poetical persona has a special affinity[21]. But this is not the only point; the three mythological love stories taken at face value are contrasted or composed according to the pattern of gradation (from the best to the worst one), but the secret bond of the initials forces us to look for some undercurrent that is common to all the three couples. This highly ambivalent framework of contrasts and similarities is, after all, one of the main topics of current debate on the poem[22].

Thirdly, the connection between the protagonists in that chain of alliterations can be seen as a kind of pointer indicating the main thread in the textual labyrinth, since beside the three main couples in the poem we can find two others hidden in the background, namely Ariadne and Bacchus along with Juno and Jupiter. These couples are both complementary in relation to the main characters: the happy marriage of a man (Peleus) and a goddess (Thetis) finds its equivalent in the relationship of a woman with a god as well as in the marriage of two divine beings (this one being complementary in the sense of "completing" the schemes according to which entities from the mythical world can be tied). One may also argue that the allusion to the Argo suggests the presence in the text of an additional unsuccessful marriage, i.e. that between Medea and Jason. This means that another example of a disastrous man-and-woman relationship has been added here[23]. Regarding the letter associations, it may also be noted that

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[20] See P.W. Harkins, *Autoallegory in Catullus 63 and 64*, TAPhA XC 1959, pp. 102–116; M.C.J. Putnam, *The Art of Catullus 64*, HSCPh LXV 1961, pp. 165–205; D.F.S. Thomson, *Aspects of Unity in Catullus 64*, CJ LVII 1961, pp. 49–57; M.L. Daniels, *Personal Revelation in Catullus LXIV*, CJ LXII 1967, pp. 351–356. *Contra*: R. Jenkyns, *Three Classical Poets: Sappho, Catullus, and Juvenal*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1982, pp. 88–90. Cf. also the recent discussion in Schmale, *op. cit.* (n. 2), pp. 25 f. Despite the doubts raised by Jenkyns, Catullus' poem 68 seems to be still valid as proof of the poet's tendency to associate some "personal" experiences with mythological themes.

[21] See Small, *op. cit.* (n. 9), p. 144; Konstan, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 60.

[22] See, e.g., J. Warden, *Catullus 64: Structure and Meaning*, CJ XCIII 1998, p. 397. It is worthwhile mentioning that the (presumably) Catullan invention of a plot based on contrasted juxtapositions of different love couples turned out to be particularly fruitful and convenient in the history of the European narrative arts, both in literature (a classical example being Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*) and, above all, in modern cinema: sharply contrasted couples constitute the basic plot in such feature movies as, for instance, Robert Altman's *Shortcuts*, Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Blind Chance*, Roman Polański's *Bitter Moon*, Pedro Almodóvar's *High Heels*, Joel and Ethan Coen's *Fargo*, or David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*.

[23] However unnamed in the poem, Jason and Medea play an important role in the Catullan story of the love affairs in the heroic past; on that topic, see e.g., Konstan, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 68; W. Clausen,

Dionysus is called 'Iacchus' in the poem; the first letter of the name makes him the counterpart (in fact the opposition) of Jason.

Finally, seen as a part of a highly "artificial" construction, a well-controlled, perfectly "sewn" fabric, this concealed thread or a "weft" in the text can support the view of poem 64 as a primarily metapoetic utterance[24]. If so, old values and old events, which, according to some critics, Catullus is trying to cast doubt on, could mean in the first place "old poetry". It is precisely for this reason that the ancient *virtutes* are connected in the poem with *par excellence* "epic" themes, i.e. the expedition of the Argonauts and the Trojan war[25]. At this point, Catullan contrariness in choosing the valuable elements from the poetic tradition manifests itself: the optimistic story (differing from many ancient accounts) of the Argonaut Peleus may serve as yet another sign of approval for the Apollonius of Rhodes' epic poem written in an Alexandrian manner (and, perhaps, also for its Latin version created by the neoteric poet Varro of Atax)[26]. At the same time, the grim depiction of the massacre committed by Achilles, his subsequent death and funeral (all scenes known from the non-Homeric Greek epic), might be seen as proof of Catullus' alleged aversion to cyclic poems, inferred from his affinity with Callimachus[27]. It could even be argued that he furnishes his own version of

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Ariadne's Leave-taking: Catullus 64.116–20, ICS II 1977, pp. 219–221; J.E.G. Zetzel, *Catullus, Ennius, and the Poetics of Allusion*, ICS VIII 1983, pp. 251–266 [= J.H. Gaisser (ed.), *Catullus. Oxford Readings in Classical Studies*, Oxford 2007, pp. 198–216]; R.J. Clare, *Catullus 64 and the Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius: Allusion and Exemplarity*, PCPhS XLII 1996, pp. 60–88; J.H. Gaisser, *Catullus*, Malden 2009, pp. 150–161, the section entitled "Time after Time (Medea and Ariadne in Poem 64)". Being involved in scrutinising the hidden presence of Jason along with the overt presence of Peleus has caused a characteristic slip in Zetzel's paper (p. 260 in ICS and p. 209 in *Oxford Readings...*): here it is Jason, instead of the correct Peleus, that became the object of Thetis' love.

[24]   See A. Laird, *Sounding out Ecphrasis. Art and Text in Catullus 64*, JRS LXXXIII 1993, pp. 18–30; G. Iversen, *The Text and the Tapestry. Three Remarks on the Composition of the Catulli Veronensis Liber*, C&M LII 2001, pp. 269–275; T.J. Robinson, *Under the Cover of Epic: Pretexts, Subtexts and Textiles in Catullus' Carmen 64*, Ramus XXXV 2006, pp. 29–62. But it is not only the matter of the famous tapestry or other cloths described in the poem: as it has been pointed out, even Athena (the winner of the famous weaving contest, after all) builds the ship for the Argonauts by "weaving" it like a textile (see W. Fitzgerald, *Catullan Provocations. Lyric Poetry and the Drama of Position*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1995, p. 151). That is because the sea journey in 64 can be interpreted as a metatextual metaphor as well; see S. Harrison, *The Primal Voyage and the Ocean of Epos: Two Aspects of Metapoetic Imagery in Catullus, Virgil and Horace*, Dictynna IV 2007, pp. 3–5 (http://dictynna.revues.org/146).

[25]   On the complexities concerning the notion of *virtus* in poem 64, see e.g., S.E. Knopp, *Catullus 64 and the Conflict between Amores and Virtutes*, CPh LXXI 1976, pp. 207–213; Konstan, *op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 40; O'Hara, *op. cit.* (n. 9), pp. 44–54.

[26]   About Apollonius' *Argonautica* in the Catullan poem, see, above all, Clare, *op. cit.* (n. 23), and J.B. Debrohun, *Catullan Intertextuality: Apollonius and the Allusive Plot of Catullus 64*, in: M.B. Skinner (ed.), *A Companion to Catullus*, Malden 2007, pp. 293–313.

[27]   On this affinity, see, e.g., W. Clausen, *Catullus and Callimachus*, HSCPh LXXIV 1970, pp. 85–94; O.D. Byars, *Myth Management: The Nature of the Hero in Callimachus' Hecale and*

the new "heroic" poetry, along with a new heroine, because no other story but Ariadne's dominates the plot of 64 and, as we have seen, her name is pivotal to the scheme analysed here. The Minoan princess is thus bonded together as an opposing character with two "villains" of the poem, i.e. Theseus (explicitly – through the narrative order) and Achilles (in a clandestine manner – through the "letter-game") and consequently becomes the main "hero" of the work designed as a new love epic[28], or rather, as FEENEY has ironically put it, "a divorce poem"[29].

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Catullus' Poem 64, Diss. University of South Florida 2009, *passim*. These literary critical ambitions in Catullus' poetry can be acknowledged as an answer to some difficulties with the proper assessment of the author's attitude to ancient, heroic times in poem 64; for a discussion of this question, see CURRAN, *op. cit.* (n. 11), pp. 171–192, and HARMON, *op. cit.* (n. 10), pp. 311–331. Nevertheless, at least one problem remains: the harsh, moralistic epilogue of the poem does not exactly square with this metapoetic interpretation; on this discrepancy as a part of the deliberate strategy, see SCHMALE, *op. cit.* (n. 2), pp. 279 f.

[28]   Much in the manner of Callimachus' female protagonist Hecale. For Ariadne in 64 as a new type of hero, see Ch.P. BROWN, *Ariadne as the Exemplum of the Virtutes of Heroes in Catullus Carmen 64*, Diss. Marshall University 2008, *passim*.

[29]   FEENEY, *op. cit.* (n. 9), p. 123.