

Catullus 68b

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Lesbia, arriving at Allius' house for her clandestine liaison with Catullus, steps on the threshold (70-72). This, in the opinion of many recent interpreters, is an ill-omened action for one who is portrayed in effect as a bride.¹ But this view rests on a confusion. No evidence has been produced that *treading* on a threshold was ever unlucky, even for a bride (others, of course, trod on thresholds without qualm, which is why Allius' threshold is 'worn'); *stumbling* was unlucky, whether or not on a threshold, and not only for brides.² As a precaution against an unlucky stumble on her formal entry into the new house, a Roman bride would, by convention, step (or be lifted) over the threshold;³ but the possible stumble, not the step on the threshold itself, was the ill-omened thing that was shunned. Lesbia omits this precaution; but there is nothing sinister about that—she is not a bride. And she does not stumble;⁴ so there is no ill omen in her action.

Lesbia is not a bride, and (therefore) does not behave like one; this needs to be emphasised against the trend of recent interpretation. When we are told (for example) that 'Lesbia is at first represented as coming to the house of Allius like a bride to the bridegroom's house (70f.)',⁵ a protest is in order: Lesbia is represented as coming to Allius' house—just that; there is nothing up to 72 that invites us to think of her as a bride. Indeed, the very fact that it is not Catullus' house she comes to forcibly reminds us of her real status.

If, therefore, we wish to understand the simile which begins in 73 as likening Lesbia to Laodamia in respect of being a bride (*coniugis ut quondam ...*), we shall have to say that at this point in the poem Catullus introduces a new perspective on his affair. There is nothing intrinsically implausible in that. But this understanding of the simile is not inevitable. Ancient rhetoric and literary criticism recognised the partial-correspondence simile as a legitimate device.⁶ From this point of view there is nothing to prevent us discounting Laodamia's marital status as irrelevant

¹ Without attempting to be comprehensive I note: S. Baker, *CP* 55 (1960) 172; G. Lieberg, *Puella Divina* (Amsterdam 1962) 207-9; R.O.A.M. Lyne, *The Latin Love Poets* (Oxford 1980) 60; C.W. Macleod, *Collected Papers* (Oxford 1983) 164; J. Sarkissian, *Catullus 68* (*Mnemosyne* Supplement 76, 1983) 17; C.J. Tuplin, *CQ* 31 (1981) 117; G. Williams, *Figures of Thought in Roman Poetry* (New Haven 1980) 54; T.P. Wiseman, *Catullus and His World* (Cambridge 1985) 161.

² *Cic. Div.* 2.84; *Ov. Am.* 1.12. 3-4; *Met.* 10.452; *Tib.* 1.3.19-20.

³ *Cat.* 61.159-61; *Lucan* 2.359; *Plaut. Cas.* 815; *Plut. Qu. Rom.* 29; *Varro ap. Servius on Ecl.* 8.29.

⁴ At *V. Aen.* 2.243 *substitit* is ominous because the Horse comes to an unintended halt; but here *constituit* suggests rather a deliberate pause: Lesbia marks her arrival with a dramatic gesture.

⁵ Tuplin (n.1) 117. Compare Lyne (n.1) 59: 'The text in this respect is quite explicit. The myth opens with Laodamia's arrival at Protesilaus' house as a *bride*; and that (the arrival at a *domus*) is the immediate point of contact between the situation of the myth and the situation of Catullus and Lesbia.' Lyne rightly did not say 'the arrival at a *domus* as a bride'; but that is what is needed if the text is to be 'quite explicit' in the respect Lyne suggests.

⁶ Rhetoric: e.g. *ad Her.* 4.61. Criticism: frequently in the Homeric scholia, e.g. on *Il.* 11.474-81. Fuller documentation in M. Heath, *Unity in Greek Poetics* (Oxford 1989) 102-7.

to the point of the comparison; on the contrary, since we *know* that Lesbia is not a bride there is a strong *prima facie* reason for so doing.

Nor is there any compelling reason to revise this judgement when we discover in 133-4 that Lesbia is attended by Cupid dressed *crocina ... in tunica*. It is true, as many commentators have pointed out, that the colour is associated with marriage, and is the colour of Hymen's clothing;⁷ but that is not the colour's invariable connotation. It is, more generally, luxurious and effeminate; and it is divine.⁸ Cupid is dressed like that because he is dainty and divine, not because he is attending a marriage—which he is not.

Moreover, Catullus knows that he is not. Lyne comments on 143-6: 'the implication that Catullus imagined specifically a wedding is confirmed by the sequel. When the romantic vision of [118] the myth is demolished, the idea of a wedding is specifically rebutted' (59). Certainly Catullus denies that he is married to Lesbia; that hardly proves that he had previously imagined otherwise: the denial need not be read as a self-correction. In fact Catullus takes it for granted and uses it as a premise in a complex argument *a fortiori*: if Juno, who is a goddess and married, tolerates her partner's frequent infidelities, so must I, who enjoy neither prerogative, tolerate Lesbia's occasional infidelities (135-48; admittedly the lacuna after 141 gives rise to some uncertainty here). These lines, arguing from a difference in the scale of the offence (*rara/plurima*) and from a twofold difference in the status of the offended party, should not be read as a drama in which the self-deceiving lover wins through to a realisation of the truth; they form a careful and witty rhetorical structure, which presupposes the truth of its premises from the outset.⁹

I can see no reason to believe, therefore, that Catullus assimilates his relationship to Lesbia to marriage at any point in this poem. This means that the relationship is not likened to the mythical marriage in the simile in respect of its being a marriage; nor, if Lesbia's arrival was not ill-omened, can it be likened to the mythical marriage in respect of its inauspicious beginnings. Consequently, the content of the long simile which compares Lesbia on her arrival to Laodamia on hers is only relevant to the simile's frame and ostensible motivation in part. In part (I think) it is relevant to itself; and in part it is relevant to the lament for Catullus' brother—which is in turn a third distinct theme, which Catullus has not attempted to integrate fully with the erotic frame.

Tuplin has, indeed, argued that the lament and the frame are 'closely interconnected' (117). At the end of the poem, he observes, 'it is evident that Catullus' reaction is not what it had once been, burning and weeping with frustration (51f.)'. He continues: 'The psychological basis of the change is, I

⁷ Cat. 61.9f.; Lucan 2.361; Ov. *Met.* 10.1; *Her.* 21.164.

⁸ Luxurious: Varro *Men.* 314. Effeminate: Sen. *Phaedra* 322; Fronto 18.5-6 van den Hout. Divine: V. Fl. 8.234 (admittedly a matrimonial context, but the *croceo subtegmine vestes* are taken from Venus' wardrobe, not made for the occasion; cf. also Apuleius *Met.* 11.3.5). Aurora (for obvious reasons) and Bacchus (Tib. 1.7.46; Sen. *Oed.* 421) are also associated with the colour.

⁹ Of course, the poet may be hinting that the lover is deceived in *rara*; but if so, the lover is not disillusioned in this poem.

suggest, the feeling that Lesbia—as, after all, simply the object of an illegitimate relationship—cannot be allowed to command the extremes of emotional reaction, a feeling brought home to Catullus by the experience of the loss of his brother. The claims of fraternal *amor* outweigh those of erotic love and should be taken more seriously; on the loss of the object of that *amor* Catullus realises that it is not appropriate to go on regarding Lesbia in the light in which he had previously seen her' (118). But this attempt to give the brother a pivotal role in the poem's thematic structure fails (his pivotal role in the formal structure of the poem is, of course, not in dispute). Catullus' *reaction* has indeed changed; but that change is not in need of explanation: in 51f., his passion was frustrated; now, thanks to Allius, it is not (we are hardly meant to forget the very service which it is the poem's professed aim to immortalise). As to Catullus' *regard* for Lesbia, I can see no evidence of change at all: *mihi quae me carior ipso est, lux mea, qua viva vivere dulce mihi est*; these are expressions of unqualified devotion to the woman he values still *longe ante omnes*.

Indeed, if we try to correlate these concluding lines with the lament for the poet's brother, so far from finding integration, we must confront an apparent contradiction: the death of his brother has deprived Catullus of what, while Lesbia lives, he still has. Compare *iucundum lumen* (93) with *lux mea* (160), *omnia tecum una perierunt gaudia nostra* (95) with *qua viva vivere dulce mihi est* (160). This contradiction is real and (so far as I can see) ineliminable.

That a poet should contradict himself is not, in itself, perturbing. By and large we do not read poetry with a view to extracting a consistent set of propositions; we may be more interested in (for example) how convincingly the poet sustains an assumed role in a given context. This is, I take it, obvious when the contexts are whole poems; that is, we are relatively unperturbed by inconsistencies of attitude in separate poems. Where one poem is concerned, we are perhaps inclined to expect a stricter material unity. But the habits acquired in one culture will not necessarily be helpful in elucidating the literature of another culture. There is evidence that the autonomous elaboration of individual elements within a single text was an accepted technique of literary composition in the Greco-Roman world; [119] this, certainly, is an interpretation for which ancient critical writings provide ample support. On this view, it would simply not be true to say that 'a Catullan poem is always about some one thing'; it *is* true that 'to work as a poem it must have some kind of unity': but unity can be conceived also in terms of (for example) the formal ordering of a multiplicity of themes.¹⁰

To locate a poem's unity at the formal, rather than the material, level is not to say that its themes, as such, are wholly unrelated to each other; in our poem, Catullus takes care to articulate the transitions from theme to theme materially as

¹⁰ The quotations are from K. Quinn, *Didaskolos* 2 (1986) 119 = *Approaches to Catullus* (Cambridge 1972) 103. The approach to questions of unity in ancient literature which I adopt here is developed more fully, in the context of an extensive survey of the ancient secondary literature, in Heath (n.6). For one illustration of the tendency towards self-contained elaboration in ancient literary practice, see my *Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London 1987) 132-7, on digressive rhetoric in tragedy.

well as formally: the partial interrelations on which we have already commented provide a point of contact or departure for each new theme. But the transitions are nevertheless between distinct themes (and not, for example, between different manifestations or aspects of a single superordinate theme). It is this which gives rise to the contradiction: in two contexts Catullus expresses the incomparable importance to him of some other person—as is entirely appropriate to a lament, entirely appropriate to a love poem; the juxtaposition of the two contexts yields an inconsistency. But no reader is obliged (or indeed ever able) to attend to or reckon as important *every* feature of a poem; which features are made salient and valued (or devalued) in any reading will depend on the presuppositions which the reader brings to the text. Readers tolerant (as ancient readers were) of thematic proliferation will not wish to force this poem's disparate contexts into confrontation; they will be rewarded for their restraint with a poem correspondingly richer and more diverse in interest.