CATULLUS 64 AND THE CONFLICT BETWEEN *AMORES* AND *VIRTUTES*

SHERRON E. KNOPP

CATULLUS 64 is a complex and puzzling poem.[1] It purports to be a marriage song for Peleus and Thetis, but contains at its center the tragic love of Theseus and Ariadne. It hails the age of heroes, but depicts heroic deeds which are less than admirable. Interpretations of the poem tend to emphasize either one or the other of these aspects, making the theme either a contrast between happy and unhappy love or an ironic comment on the heroic age.[2] I would like to suggest, however, that the theme is not *amores* or *uirtutes*, but the conflict between the two. The marriage of Peleus and Thetis is threatened by it, the story of Theseus and Ariadne illustrates it, and the prophecy about Achilles and Polyxena warns of it.

The story of Theseus and Ariadne at the center of the poem illustrates the conflict most clearly. Instead of narrating it chronologically, Catullus juxtaposes events of the past, present, and future in a series of tableaux which alternate Theseus and his *magnae uirtutes* with Ariadne and her *indomiti furores*. He thus creates a pattern in which love and heroism are as carefully balanced against each other as masculine Roman Septimius and feminine Greek Acme are in poem 45:

Ariadne on shore (betrayed)	53–70	(17 lines)	passion
Theseus in Crete	71–123	(52 lines)	heroism
Ariadne's lament	124–201	(77 lines)	passion vs. heroism
Theseus in Athens	202–250	(48 lines)	heroism
Iacchus on shore (seeking Ariadne)	251–64	(13 lines)	passion

Ariadne stands out as a sympathetic figure in this section, and no doubt her plight appealed to Catullus because of his relationship with Lesbia; but he devotes equal space to Theseus, whose deeds are placed among the *uirtutes* of heroes by the opening lines of the story: "haec uestis priscis hominum uariata figuris / heroum mira uirtutes indicat arte" (50–51). Although the unexpected portrait of Ariadne's desolation which follows does not make Theseus an admirable figure, her plight reflects on him as a

1. All quotations of Catullus will be from the text of R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1958; repr. 1972).

2. For the former see Clyde Murley, "The Structure and Proportion of Catullus LXIV," *TAPA* 68 (1937): 305–317; Friedrich Klingner, *Catulls Peleus-Epos* (Munich, 1956). Those who discuss the love theme often read the poem as a personal document in which Catullus identifies himself with Ariadne and describes Peleus and Thetis as the ideal he wished for himself and Lesbia. See especially P. W. Harkins, "Autoallegory in Catullus 63 and 64," *TAPA* 90 (1959): 102–116; M. C. J. Putnam, "The Art of Catullus 64," *HSCP* 65 (1961): 165–205; D. F. S. Thomson, "Aspects of Unity in Catullus 64," *CJ* 57 (1961): 49–57; M. L. Daniels, "Personal Revelation in Catullus LXIV," *CJ* 62 (1967): 351–56. For the view that the poem is an ironic commentary on the heroic age, see T. E. Kinsey, "Irony and Structure in Catullus 64," *Latomus* 24 (1965): 911–31; and the excellent studies by Leo C. Curran, "Catullus 64 and the Heroic Age," *YClS* 21 (1969): 171–92; and J. C. Bramble, "Structure and Ambiguity in Catullus LXIV," *PCPhS* 196=n.s. 16 (1970): 22–41.

lover, not as a hero. Moreover, Catullus judges him only *immemor* (58) as he flees from Ariadne, implying perhaps that *amores* simply do not claim Theseus' first attention.

His allegiances, in contrast to Ariadne's, are revealed in lines 71–123, when *ferox Theseus* comes to the land of the *iniustus rex* and provides an example of the *uirtutes* alluded to in line 51. The injustice is the slaughter of the *electi iuuenes* and *decus innuptarum* of Athens to provide a *daps* for the Minotaur (78–79); and by his word choice Catullus makes it an ironic mockery of both love and heroism. The word *daps*, as Fordyce points out, has solemn religious overtones,[3] and Catullus applies it in line 304 to the wedding feast of Peleus and Thetis, who are themselves an *electus iuuenis* (cf. 4) and a *decus innuptarum* (27–30). That Theseus' *heroum uirtutes* in remedying the injustice of Minos are above reproach Catullus makes clear by spelling out his motivation, a thoroughly admirable *pietas* toward his fellow citizens: "ipse suum Theseus pro caris corpus Athenis / proicere optauit potius quam talia Cretam / funera Cecropiae nec funera portarentur" (81–83). In lines 202–250, he will extend the reader's view of Theseus' *pietas* by showing that it also includes his father.

Minos' world, unlike Theseus', is not one of *magnae uirtutes* and *pietas*. In fact, everything connected with him seems ironically phrased to emphasize his lack of heroic stature and to contrast him with Theseus. Thus, when Theseus arrives "magnanimum ad Minoa . . . sedesque superbas" (85), *superbas* is not unexpected as an attribute in speaking of Minos, while *magnanimum*, which is usually explained as a stock epic epithet,[4] operates with the same ironic force as *daps* does in the reference to the Minotaur: Minos is no more *magnanimus* than the Minotaur's meal is a *daps*. As a member of this world, Ariadne can quite easily fall in love with her father's enemy. Not subject to the *pietas* which prompts Theseus to sacrifice himself *pro caris Athenis*, she, *filia*, can leave the *genitoris uultus* and the *complexus matris* (117–18).[5] To these things, motivated by personal passion instead of heroic *pietas*, Ariadne prefers the *dulcis amor* of Theseus (120), much like Acme in poem 45: "uno in Septimio fidelis Acme / facit delicias libidinesque" (23–24). However, it is a precarious position to opt for when, unlike Septimius who prefers Acme to Britains and Syrias, Theseus, ". . . saeuum cupiens contra contendere monstrum / aut mortem appeteret . . . aut praemia laudis" (101–2). Thus, both characters are flawed. And both are admirable. Ariadne's lack of *pietas* does not negate the value of her love any more than Theseus' lack of personal passion negates his heroism.

In the center of the Theseus–Ariadne story, Ariadne's lament articulates the tragic conflict between love and heroism, as Theseus, not hero here but *coniunx* (123), disappears over the sea. As *coniunx*, Theseus is *perfidus* (132)

3. C. J. Fordyce, *Catullus: A Commentary* (Oxford, 1961), p. 289.

4. Robinson Ellis, *A Commentary on Catullus*[2] (Oxford, 1889), p. 299; Wilhelm Kroll, ed., *C. Valerius Catullus* (Leipzig, 1922), p. 156; E. T. Merrill, ed., *Catullus* (Boston, 1893; repr. Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 139; Fordyce, p. 290. Kenneth Quinn, *Catullus: The Poems* (London, 1970), p. 315, observes that the word is used ironically but does not explain how.

5. Fordyce, p. 294, notes also how the juxtaposition of *genitoris filia* "emphasizes the unnaturalness of the act."

and has neglected the *numen diuum* (134); but by the words of her reproach, Ariadne recalls also her own shortcoming: ". . . et potius germanum amittere creui, / quam tibi fallaci supremo in tempore dessem" (150–51). She reproaches Theseus for lacking personal passion and cannot comprehend his less personal, less passionate code of *pietas*:

> quaenam te genuit sola sub rupe leaena,
> quod mare conceptum spumantibus exspuit undis,
> quae Syrtis, quae Scylla rapax, quae uasta Carybdis,
> talia qui reddis pro dulci praemia uita?
>
> [154–57]

In this case personal passion will wreak havoc on heroic *pietas;* for when she prays for vengeance, the Eumenides grant it.

Lines 202–250, describing Theseus' return to Athens, balance lines 76–123, as heroism and *pietas* are once again emphasized and implicitly opposed to passion. In a flashback the poet recalls Theseus' departure from Athens and from Aegeus. Aegeus' speech on this occasion reveals the kind of *pietas* which Catullus in poem 72 considers to be the highest emotion he can offer Lesbia ("pater ut gnatos diligit et generos," 4) and which is obviously lacking in Ariadne's family. Aegeus' acceptance of Theseus' departure, because his son's *feruida uirtus* requires it (218), perhaps hints that Theseus overdoes the heroic, just as Ariadne abandons herself too completely to passion; but Aegeus is not criticizing Theseus. *Feruida uirtus* is a positive ideal and it does not conflict with the *pietas* between father and son. Thus, although Theseus forgets the promises of passion to Ariadne, it takes the interference of the gods to make him forget the promises to his father ("haec mandata prius constanti mente tenentem," 238). By formulating Theseus' punishment in terms of his offense, that is, in terms of his mindfulness and unmindfulness of particular values, Catullus crystallizes the conflict between Theseus and Ariadne: "sic funesta domus ingressus tecta paterna / morte ferox Theseus, qualem Minoidi luctum / obtulerat mente immemori, talem ipse recepit" (246–48). *Ferox* recalls line 73 and Theseus' heroic trip to the palace of the unjust king, and because as a *ferox* he was unmindful of Ariadne's passion, vengeance destroys things of which he was mindful.

The final segment of the Theseus–Ariadne story balances the opening scene in which Ariadne stood "indomitos in corde gerens . . . furores" (54) and "saxea ut effigies bacchantis" (61), while Theseus, unable to return her love in kind, fled. In the last scene Iacchus, leading his bacchantes, "quae tum alacres passim lymphata mente furebant" (254), comes seeking Ariadne, *incensus amore* (253), and passion will meet passion. As Putnam has observed,[6] Ariadne's *eheu* even sounds like Iacchus' *euhoe.* These two portraits of unrestrained passion thus frame the two balanced portraits of Theseus' disciplined *uirtutes*, while in the center Ariadne's lament reveals the disastrous conflict between them. However, although the story on the bedspread contains a sober warning about *amores* and *uirtutes*, its implied resolution

6. "The Art of Catullus 64," p. 187.

in favor of passionate love makes it not inappropriate to grace the marriage bed of Peleus and Thetis. Moreover, the first fifty lines of the poem show that the warning itself is appropriate for the bridal pair.

Peleus enters the poem as one of the *lecti iuuenes* (4) on the expedition of the Argonauts. Like Theseus, he is a hero. Moreover, he sails on a ship built by Athena (8–9) and thus voyages under the care of the same goddess to whom Aegeus entrusted Theseus. Thetis appears in the midst of the sea, one of a number of nymphs "nutricum tenus exstantes e gurgite cano" (18)—a description echoed vaguely later when Ariadne stands in the water on the shore, "non contecta leui uelatum pectus amictu, / non tereti strophio lactentis uincta papillas" (64–65). In both cases the sea innocently provides the backdrop.[7] It bears the incursion of the Argo ("illa [sc. carina] rudem cursu prima imbuit Amphitriten," 11), and, indifferent to grief, it sports with Ariadne's clothes ("omnia quae toto delapsa e corpore passim / ipsius ante pedes fluctus salis alludebant," 66–67). The descriptions suggest tentatively that Peleus and Thetis have the potential to become another Theseus and Ariadne.

For the moment, however, any sinister implications remain hidden. The tone of the passage reflects only the excitement of first-time experience. The ship initiates the sea, and the image of pines from Mt. Pelion swimming through the waves emphasizes the strange wonder of it. In the meeting of men and nymphs, the nymphs stare at the ship, a *monstrum*, with wonder, *admirantes* (15), while the mortals, "illa, atque <haud> alia, . . . luce" (16), behold sea goddesses with their own eyes. Even this mood, emphasizing vision scarcely to be believed, will be echoed ironically in the strained verbs of seeing applied to Ariadne, who also will scarcely believe her eyes: "necdum etiam sese quae uisit uisere credit" (55). But that connection, like the others, will not occur to the reader until later.

For the present, the marvelous journey provides the occasion for Peleus' more marvelous love. The description of it, insofar as it touches on *magnae uirtutes*, implicitly pertains to Peleus, but the first explicit mention of him associates him with love: "tum Thetidis Peleus incensus fertur amore" (19). Lines 22–30, wherein Catullus apostrophizes Peleus and the age of heroes, do not have to be interpreted ironically to be intelligible, for Catullus praises Peleus particularly as a lover:

> Thessaliae columen Peleu, cui Iuppiter ipse,
> ipse suos diuum genitor concessit amores;
> tene Thetis tenuit pulcerrima Nereine?
> tene suam Tethys concessit ducere neptem,
> Oceanusque, mari totum qui amplectitur orbem?
>
> [26–30]

At the same time, the epithet *Thessaliae columen* associates Peleus with heroism and with the code of conduct held by Theseus. The reader cannot

7. For a good analysis of the sea imagery, see Curran, "Catullus 64 and the Heroic Age," pp. 176–77; and Richard J. Wolfe, S.J., "Imagery in Catullus 64," *CW* 62 (1969): 297–300.

know yet what danger to love this implies; but Catullus does, and reveals it in the story of Theseus and Ariadne.

For Peleus and Thetis, however, things may turn out differently. Although Peleus meets Thetis, as Theseus met Ariadne, on a heroic quest, he is, like Ariadne (97) and Iacchus (253), *incensus amore* (19). Moreover, the preparations for the wedding in the surrounding countryside (31–49) suggest a society which abandons duty to indulge passion: "squalida desertis rubigo infertur aratris" (42). By the subsequent description of palace opulence, Catullus creates for Peleus an ambience in which love can flourish.

On the other side of the Theseus–Ariadne story, after the human guests leave and the divine guests arrive, Chiron and Penios offer their gifts of flowers and trees. Then a shadow falls, for the first time directly, on the marriage. Prometheus appears in the midst of celebration, "extenuata gerens ueteris uestigia poenae" (295), while Apollo and Diana conspicuously absent themselves. Although many critics refer to other accounts of the myth to explain this passage,[8] the poem itself provides a sufficient context for its interpretation. Since Catullus avoids any negative allusion to the prior association of Thetis and Jupiter in the first part of the poem, underscoring only the good fortune of Peleus, to whom Jupiter himself *suos . . . concessit amores* (26–27), one does not need to connect Prometheus with the revelation that Thetis would bear a son greater than his father. The Parcae reveal that anyway. Catullus has a different function for Prometheus: the traces of old wounds recall that the relationship between gods and men has had a stormy history. Likewise, the absence of Apollo and Diana reveals that even in this happy moment at least one god, together with his sister, scorned Peleus, "nec Thetidis taedas uoluit celebrare iugalis" (302). The dark suggestions accentuate the precariousness of the balance in which Peleus and Thetis are poised—a balance upset by Theseus, but one which can be maintained with the help of the gods.

The wedding song of the Parcae, like the story of Theseus and Ariadne, once again warns of conflict, but it also reflects the whole poem in miniature: three stanzas extoll the love of Peleus and Thetis; seven foretell the increasingly bloody deeds of Achilles, climaxed by the brutal sacrifice of Polyxena; and the final two return to the love of Peleus and Thetis. Thus the story of Achilles and Polyxena is embedded in the praises of love, just as the story of Ariadne is framed on a larger scale by the wedding.

The Parcae begin by verifying what Catullus implied in the beginning of the poem, that the love of Peleus and Thetis is as near to an ideal as possible: "nulla domus tales umquam contexit amores, / nullus amor tali coniunxit foedere amantes, / qualis adest Thetidi, qualis concordia Peleo" (334–36). Furthermore, the song of the Parcae is *ueridicum oraculum* (326), a thing "perfidiae quod post nulla arguet aetas" (322); and Catullus emphasizes their veracity from the moment he introduces them:[9] "ueridicos

8. See especially Curran, "Catullus 64 and the Heroic Age," and Bramble, "Structure and Ambiguity." For the various accounts of the myth, see R. Reitzenstein, "Die Hochzeit des Peleus und der Thetis," *Hermes* 35 (1900): 73–105.

9. Cf. Bramble, "Structure and Ambiguity," p. 28, who makes the same point for different reasons.

Parcae coeperunt edere cantus" (306). At the same time as they corroborate Catullus' opinion of Peleus' good fortune, the Parcae offer an even stronger warning for him than the marriage bedspread; and the first two lines of their song explain the need for the warning: "o decus eximium magnis uirtutibus augens, / Emathiae tutamen, Opis carissime nato" (323–24). *Emathiae tutamen* picks up the epithet *Thessaliae columen* with which Catullus introduced Peleus and recalls his status as a hero. More important, he is called "decus eximium magnis uirtutibus augens." On the face of it, the address honors him, the ideal can be ennobling; but the poem has shown that heroism does not mix well with love, and the Parcae will make the point unmistakably clear by showing the ultimate progress of *uirtutes* at the cost of *amores*.

The stanzas about Achilles begin neutrally enough with a description of his courage and swiftness, followed by a reference to the Trojan War, in which "non illi quisquam bello se conferet heros" (343). The third stanza ironically places his "egregiae uirtutes claraque facta" (348) next to the weeping mothers whose sons he will have killed; the fourth chronicles the slaughter as Achilles proceeds "uelut densas praecerpens messor aristas" (353), and the fifth again ironically refers to heaps of corpses choking the rivers as *magnae uirtutes* (357). The last two stanzas climax the carnage with a description of Polyxena, a *testis* to the deeds of the hero (362), whose innocent blood is required to crown them. All together they make a grisly portrait of *magnae uirtutes*.

Immediately following the vision of the *truncum corpus* of Polyxena atop the grave of Achilles, the idyllic love of Peleus and Thetis is recalled: "quare agite optatos animi coniungite amores. / accipiat coniunx felici foedere diuam, / dedatur cupido iam dudum nupta marito" (372–74). The effect is the same as that produced earlier when Catullus followed the promise of *heroum . . . uirtutes* with the desolation of Ariadne, and the purpose is the same. Although Peleus and Thetis for the moment lack nothing in their love, they could end up as Achilles and Polyxena will, or as Theseus and Ariadne have—or, on the other hand, as Ariadne and Iacchus probably will. For the moment, they remain poised precariously.

The poem, then, presents a consistent and coherent picture of the heroic age with its built-in tension between *amores* and *uirtutes*. In the epilogue the poet sets up a contrast between the past:

> praesentes namque ante domos inuisere castas
> heroum, et sese mortali ostendere coetu,
> caelicolae nondum spreta pietate solebant
>
> [384–86]

and the present:

> omnia fanda nefanda malo permixta furore
> iustificam nobis mentem auertere deorum.
> quare nec talis dignantur uisere coetus,
> nec se contingi patiuntur lumine claro.
>
> [405–8]

He does not say that heroism in the past led to nobler actions than in the present (the deeds of Theseus and Achilles did not), or that lovers were happier then (Ariadne and Polyxena were not); but, because men in the former age did not scorn to revere the gods, the *caelicolae* built ships, married mortals, came to weddings, protected cities, and executed curses. Now they do not. On one level, the epilogue offers a superficial explanation for the actions of the gods in heroic times; on a deeper level, the gods do seem to be effectual in the poem, acting in behalf of love and passion. Jupiter exercises his *iustifica mens* (406) at the prayer of Ariadne, and Iacchus comes in person bringing passion for passion, while the Parcae condescend *sese mortali ostendere coetu* (386) at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis to warn them of the danger which threatens them.

The subject of the poem, first and last, is the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, and the theme is the inherent antagonism between the ideals of *amores* and *uirtutes*. Viewed this way, all the parts of the poem assume their proper relationship to one another, and the references to *magnae uirtutes* assume their proper significance integrated with the love theme. The story of Theseus and Ariadne no longer appears to be a digression inserted because Catullus could not write of love without writing of himself and Lesbia, but has immediate relevance to the bridal pair. The prophecy of the Parcae about Achilles and Polyxena does not contradict their good wishes for the bridal pair, but reinforces them. The references to *magnae uirtutes* do not undercut the stature of the heroes involved, but explain their actions as lovers. Beneath surface complexity and variety, the thematic and structural unity of Catullus 64 makes it one of the most brilliant achievements of the *doctus poeta*.

Williams College