

'BREAST IS BEST': CATULLUS 64.18

Catullus' use of *nutrices* for the Nereids' breasts in line 18 of Poem 64 is not perhaps the most important problem in the poem, but it is not without interest and may have significance beyond its narrow context. This 'weird preciousness' (R. Jenkyns)¹ has been integrated into a wider reading by Francis Cairns,² who interestingly drew attention to Artemidorus 2.37–8 where to dream of Aphrodite emerging from the sea and naked as far as the ζώνη is a good omen for sea-travellers because her breasts are τροφιμώτατοι. So too, to dream of Nereids and Amphitrite (cf. Cat. 64.11) is also a good omen. Cairns linked this passage to the persistent connections of Aphrodite and the Nereids with marriage, concluding that the Argonauts are presented with a very good omen as they set out and as the prospective bride and groom, Peleus and Thetis, meet. Cairns naturally finds support here for what we might call the 'positive' view of Catullus' heroic age, a view now apparently in the ascendant after the doubts created by John Bramble's well-known paper.³ Problems remain of course – Catullus 64 is not a dream –⁴ and the purpose of the present note is to keep debate alive by calling attention to a rather different set of considerations which complicate, rather than undermine, Cairns' reading.

The starting-point is the familiar fact that the proem of Catullus 64 is much indebted to Apollonius' *Argonautica*, in particular to the description of the start of the *Argo*'s journey at 1.540–58 and to 4.930ff. in which Thetis and the Nereids transport the ship safely past the Planktai.⁵ The Nereids' bare breasts obviously recall and vary the bare legs of Apollonius' Nereids (4.940). It may even be that Catullus offers us a humorous misinterpretation of *Arg.* 4.949, where the young girls playing ball (*à la* Nausicaa) to whom the Nereids are compared are described as κόλπον ἐπ' ἱστίας εἰλίξασαι; they have presumably rolled *up* their tunics, but they might equally well have rolled the top half (κόλπος) *down*. More certainly, perhaps, the triple anaphora of *tum* in lines 19–21 corrects Apollonius' (more usual) chronology in which Peleus' relations with Thetis are long over by the time the *Argo* sails. Whatever might be thought of individual details, there is no doubt that we are cued in, not just to the *Argonautica*, but specifically to Apollonius' version of the story of Peleus and Thetis – not perhaps, despite Hera's rhetoric, the happiest of omens. We may compare how Ariadne carries into Catullus' poem the resonances of the *Argonautica* in which she provides an unhappy analogue and foreshadowing of Medea's abandonment. Whether or not such dissonances matter in epithalamic poetry will be (and is) a matter for dispute.

¹ *Three Classical Poets* (London, 1982), p. 105.

² 'The Nereids of Catullus 64.12–23b', *Grazer Beiträge* 11 (1984), 95–101.

³ J. C. Bramble, 'Structure and Ambiguity in Catullus LXIV', *PCPS* n.s. 16 (1970), 22–41. For a recent rejection of Bramble's position cf. M. Heath, *Unity in Greek Poetics* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 60–2.

⁴ Cairns appeals to *oculis* in line 17: 'it may be that Catullus means to imply that this meeting did not take place in a dream...' (p. 98). The starting-point for discussion should be *Arg.* 4.855 and, in view of the considerations raised by Cairns, it might be relevant that in the *Argonautica* Thetis abandoned Peleus 'like a dream' after he interrupted her as she sought to make Achilles immortal (4.877).

⁵ For the debt see, *inter al.*, R. Reitzenstein, 'Die Hochzeit des Peleus und der Thetis', *Hermes* 35 (1900), 73–105, pp. 89–90; U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Hellenistische Dichtung* (Berlin, 1924), ii.299–300; F. Klingner, *Studien zur griechischen und römischen Literatur* (Zurich, 1964), p. 160; R. F. Thomas, 'Catullus and the Polemics of Poetic Reference (Poem 64.1–18)', *AJP* 103 (1982), 144–64.

In Apollonius' epic, stress is laid upon the separation of the baby Achilles from both his parents. At 1.553–8 he appears in the arms of his centaur foster-parents as the *Argo* sails past Pelion, and at 4.813 Hera pathetically refers to the baby's longing for Thetis' milk, *τεοῦ λίπποντα γάλακτος*. That verse hints at an etymology of the hero's name from *α-χείλος*,⁶ the one who did not bring his lips to his mother's breast. Thus a specific reference to the nurturing power of breasts within a context recalling Apollonius' *Argonautica* is, at the very least, tonally ambiguous. In Apollonius' version, Peleus is left with nothing but despair, and Thetis' breasts are all but unused.⁷

The conclusions to be drawn from this are, of course, as nuanced as the reference itself. It could be argued that Catullus' is a 'positive' reversal of the Apollonian situation, or (less plausibly) that Catullus does not want us to know the Apollonian text *that* well. With either explanation, however, doubts remain.

Pembroke College, Cambridge

RICHARD HUNTER

⁶ Cf. Richardson on *h.Dem.* 236.

⁷ At 4.871 we are told that during the day Thetis used to anoint Achilles with ambrosia; it is reasonable, I think, to see this as all the nourishment he got.

A NOTE ON 'VIS ABDITA QUAEDAM' (*DRN* 5.1233)

usque adeo res humanas vis abdita quaedam
obterit et pulchros fascis saevasque securis
proculcare ac ludibrio sibi habere videtur

(5.1233–5)¹

The curious phrase 'vis abdita quaedam' has traditionally divided commentators into two camps.² One group cautiously ensures that 5.1233–5 is kept consistent with the poem's overall scientific perspective and pre-empts any reference on the poet's part to a supernatural force. Munro, for instance, glosses the phrase as 'the secret power and working of nature'. He supports this interpretation by finding in Book 6 a passage that he believes refers to the same disruptive and destructive physical force (6.29–31).³ Along the same lines Minadeo proposes that we regard 'vis abdita quaedam' as 'the principle of destruction in the universe'. He understands the phrase to refer to a force which balances the creative or generative force in nature, just as Strife counters Love in the Empedoclean cosmology.⁴ It can be said in favour of this interpretation that the words 'vis abdita quaedam' must refer most immediately to lines 1226–32. Certainly, *vis* recalls the phrase 'vis violenti...venti' (1226), the violent force of the wind which destroys a naval effort, by sweeping a general, his fleet, his legions and his elephants into the sea.⁵

A second group of scholars prefers to understand 5.1233–5 as offering the layperson's superstitious explanation of a natural disaster, such as the storm at sea. For Giancotti, Bollack, Schrijvers, and Costa, 'vis abdita quaedam' is the 'vis

¹ Cited from C. Bailey, *Lucreti De Rerum Natura Libri Sex*² (Oxford, 1978).

² See C. Giussani, *T. Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* (Torino, 1929), v.146.

³ Munro, *T. Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* (Cambridge, 1893), p. 344.

⁴ Richard Minadeo, *The Lyre of Science. Formal Meaning in Lucretius' De Rerum Natura* (Detroit, 1969), p. 96. Also see Giussani, *op. cit.*, v.146; C. Bailey, *T. Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* (Oxford, 1947), i.1519; A. Ernout and L. Robin, *Lucrèce De Rerum Natura* (Paris, 1962), iii.170.

⁵ The historical reference here seems to be the invasion of Pyrrhus. Cf. *DRN* 5.1302, 1339; Pliny, *HN* 8.16.