

## Social and Decorative Fabrics: The Coverlet in Catullus 64

In Catullus 64, taste is a faculty possessed by an artist or viewer that separates him from a shared form of life – specifically, one whereof the spiritual determinations are the *heroum uirtutes*; the cultivation of taste may be ethically compromising. Taste draws the poet to *nugae* like talking ships (4.1-2) and swimming pine trees (64.1-2), to strange and bedazzling spectacles which are not obviously the spiritual determinations of a new shared form of life. So much will be evident on a reading of Catullus' *ecphrasis* of the coverlet in the context of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. The pervasiveness of taste in the narrative over any concern for the socially meaningful – a focus on decorative, rather than social, fabric – ethically dislocates the poem. Beauty is not a means of tying together the shared form of life, but of bedazzling by means of decoration. The scholarship has called our attention to Catullus' independence (Quinn, 1999, p. 25), his sensitivity to *amor* rather than *uirtus* (Knopp, 1976, pp. 211-13), and even his superior moral position over against Rome (Konstan, 1977, p. 108). Using Giorgio Agamben's account of taste and the severance of art from the social fabric in early modern Europe (Agamben, 1999, pp. 13-27), I want to reconsider, by means of a reading of the *ecphrasis* in poem 64, the ethical possibilities that the scholarship has asserted for Catullus, to cast the independence of the artist in a different light, and to consider the grounds for an indictment of his conscience.

The coverlet is explicitly a luxury object that stands out among other luxury objects (Fordyce, 1961, p. 285), a fact that interests Catullus. As an art object, it has a place in the social fabric of which the wedding of Peleus and Thetis is a part: it portrays *heroum uirtutes* for the people of the heroic age. Within Catullan poetics, its value does not come from the *heroum uirtutes* (Boucher, 1956, pp. 196-7); the details he gives us point to other concerns (Kinsey, 1965, p. 915) Value is grounded in decorative flair, bedazzlement, and Ariadne's emotional

spectacle. Ariadne's *amor* is delusive, and her spectacle is mired in solipsism. Is Catullan taste, the desire for bedazzlement over social integration, likewise solipsistic?

Agamben's account of taste suggests this strident reading: the values of taste remove the artist from the social fabric and transport him to a meaningless no-man's land (Agamben, 1999, p. 16) In light of Agamben's account of taste, and the ethical dislocation brought when Catullus makes Ariadne the heroine of his poem, we have grounds for worrying about whether the break that Catullus brings about between the work of art and the social fabric necessarily implies some flimsiness of conscience on his part.

My main aim in this paper is to prove that there are grounds for indicting Catullus' conscience, to show that his neoteric independence does not deserve unqualified praise. Whether this indictment is to be upheld is another matter, one which I will treat in the concluding portion of my paper. There might be something from which artists and spectators need to be set free, in which case there is a positive role for taste; hence the ironic notes in Agamben's account of an artistic process that is interwoven in the social fabric – the tasteless art and spectacle of the waning middle ages (Agamben, 1999, p. 14). Catullus may not be so repellent as Rameau's nephew, Agamben's paradigm case of the man of taste (Agamben, 1999, p. 23), even if there is an ethically noxious side to his art. Once we have shown the ethically fraught dimension of his art, we will be prepared to save him from the indictment, and to find with more certainty the spiritual determinations of his form of life, and the way in which he shares it through his art even as he stands apart from the shared form held together by *heroum uirtutes* and looks instead to the cultivation of intimacy (Granarolo, 1972, p. 434; Putnam, 1961 *passim*).

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