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"Marriage Catullan Style": Poem 61

Catullus 61 has been thoroughly studied as a composite of Greek and Roman "marriage hymns," and as a source of information on Greek and Roman marriage customs (Kroll 1960, Fedeli 1983), Thomsen 1992 et al). The poem has been assessed as "celebrating a love match" and as a poem of "bright cheerfulness" (Wiseman, 1985); it has been described as presenting "emphatic approval of the love of a married couple" (Arkins, 1982), or as representing a Catullan transition to a more serious type of poem that portrays marriage as a "shared commitment to long term perpetuation." Hallett, 1988). But, such assertions do not take into sufficient consideration the ambivalence with which Catullus addresses the topics of desire and marriage in this poem (Thomsen), the introduction to a series of long poems in which marriage and desire are the main subject. This paper examines the poem as reflecting the style and thought found in the polymetric poems and argues that poem 61 cannot be fully appreciated without investigating the complexities of the contrast between its narrative structure and its language and tone. The former moves from the *deductio* to the *consummatio* of an "ideal" union between a handsome man and a beautiful woman, the latter suggests that the union may not be harmonious, that the bride is not as innocent as she appears, and that the marriage may be marred by sexual infidelity.

The poet's depictions of Hymenaios, the maidens, the bride, the groom, and the concubinus are complex, sometimes dark, often humorous, and frequently ironic. The god, who arrives dressed as a bride, is androgynous, his powers exaggerated for effect. (Dettmer, 1997). The groom's promised future role as a loyal and faithful husband is cast in question by the allusion to his past sexual peccadilloes with young boys (*glabris*) and by the clear possibility that they will continue (lines 134-141). The admonition to the *concupinus* in the "Fescinnine" verses to accept his own coming of age ironically foregrounds his possible future role as sexual partner.

The paper centers, however, on the language and imagery describing the bride. I suggest that the six diminutives describing the bride do not portray their object as "something caressed," or emphasize her "grace and delicacy" (Fedeli, 33, Ronconi, but see also Ross, 1969); these diminutives are ironic and humorous (lines 56, 162, 177, 178, 184, 189). Early in the poem, the poet has already established the bride as erotically attractive: she is like Venus (line 17-18), like Venus's flowering myrtle (21-25) moist with dew, and she is eager for sex (*coniugis cupidam novi*, line 32). His later allusions to her as young and fearful must be seen in the light of these earlier references (*pace* Fedeli). Diminutives such as *puellulae/am* and *bracchiolum* (lines 174-175, 182) are used of the bride just as she is about to join the groom in bed, where, far from being a frightened victim, she apparently will enjoy herself (*ludite ut lubet*, line 204) in "incessant marital activity" (*munere assiduo* (lines 229-232, trans. Garrison, 1989).

This utilization of diminutives recalls their presence as a device that Catullus uses to signal humorous irony (see poems 1 and 3, or 12, for example, and their possible origins in the frequent use of them in Roman comedy); as such, the diminutives also have a far

different significance than that of providing words to fit the meter. (V. Malazzo, 1975). In addition to the diminutives that question the bride's youth and innocence, the emphasis on her virginity is gently ridiculed by the many references to gardens and flowers, the traditional metaphor of the virgin as a delicate blooming flower itself is made comic by its frequent use (lines 57; 87-91; 186-188) and by diminutives such as *ore floridulo* (187): these allusions to the bride as a helpless flower about to plucked reach their comic acme in lines 186-188. The garden metaphors used of the bride instead of suggesting her delicate innocence also have a distinctly erotic context (21-25, 31-35, 101-104). These variations are typical of the poet, who clearly exploits these conventional metaphors in poems 11 and 62.

The ambivalence towards all the characters, but especially the bride, in this so-called marriage hymn casts the shadow of skepticism on the poem's promises of conjugal bliss, the birth of a son, and the *dignitas* that the privileges of age and status will bring. This is "Marriage Catullan Style." The aims of the poet to be clever and delightful, "*urbanus*" and "*lepidus*" drive the poem from beginning to end.