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Self-Delusion in Catullus 83 and 92

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arranged in an almost chiasmic order to increase the effectiveness of the comparison. The first example, that of Pasiphae's love for the bull, is by far the most outrageous of the three examples which the poet uses to illustrate the lengths to which passion will drive a woman; and the last example, that of Scylla, who brought about her father's death as well as her own and the destruction of an entire kingdom, illustrates by far the most devastating consequences which a woman's lust can bring on. And thus, backed up by an appeal to a higher and more firmly established order, the poet's indictment is complete; and his comparison of lust in men and women shows clearly that the women are just as guilty as the men.

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### Self-Delusion in Catullus 83 and 92

These two small poems occasion little critical comment, largely of a prosopographical cast.<sup>1</sup> Lesbia is identified with Clodia, sister of P. Clodius Pulcher and wife of Q. Caecilius Metellus Celer (cos. 60 BC), the *uir* of 83.1. Of course, there are dissenters from the traditional identifications,<sup>2</sup> but it is not my purpose here to pronounce upon the probabilities of disparate biographical speculations. Rather, I mean to suggest that, however we envisage the *mise-en-scène* alluded to in 83.1-2, literary criticism of the poem should reckon with the fact that those lines simply provide a bit of data and that the poem as a whole is in fact an artistic presentation of Catullus' reaction to that data.<sup>3</sup> In 83 and later in 92 we are witnessing a mental event: an act of therapeutic self-deception.

In my view, the self-confidence that a purely literal reading ascribes to the *Icherzählung* of poems 83 and 92 is uncharacteristic of the lover whose psychic turmoil is revealed in the other Lesbia poems. It is more consistent with the insecurity of that *persona* to see in 83.3-6 a deliberate evasion of the unpleasant conclusions that might well be drawn from the situation described in lines 1-2. The bravado of the apostrophe to the insensitive and asinine *uir* is a ruse to conceal from the poet's addressee — himself — a more typical lack of self-assurance (cf. poems 70, 72, 75, 109); the over-elaborated rationalization of the last four lines bespeaks a mind in need of confirmation.

<sup>1</sup> Most recently, for example, K. Quinn speaks of them as "two fairly simple cases," in *Catullus: An Interpretation* (London 1972) 60-62.

<sup>2</sup> If Lesbia is Clodia, but her *uir* is not Metellus, we may entertain the possibility of a second marriage, subsequent to 59 (the year of Metellus' death), and, concomitantly, a later date of composition for this poem. If the *uir* is no husband at all, but rather a "recognized lover," we may indulge in supposition about his identity. Is he, perhaps, the Rufus of poem 77, the M. Caelius Rufus defended by Cicero in 56? And what if Lesbia is not Clodia Metelli?

<sup>3</sup> This responsibility is not discharged by notice of a *topos*, adducing Propertius 3.8 or Ovid *Remedia Amoris* 647-48.

Finally, the *hoc est* of line 6 has the ring of nervous assertion and acceptance of a willful misrepresentation: "that's it" = "that *must* be it" ("I will not allow myself to believe it is otherwise").

The plausibility of such a reading is increased by the companion piece, poem 92. This supplies the rationale of self-delusion: Catullus projects onto Lesbia an infatuation as fervid as his own for her. But does he ever give us reason to suppose that Lesbia was actually so devoted to him or that he had not the perspicacity to see her for what she was? It was only passion that could drive him to fond supposition of mutual dedication. The gravitational pull of the "sense-seizing" fever (cf. poem 51) was a predominant factor even at his most somberly realistic moments of resigned recognition, as in poem 72. The effort of will we witness in poem 8 (cf. line 19: *at tu, Catulle, destinatus obdura*) was not always adequate to counteract the tendency to self-delusion we see in poems 83 and 92.

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### Sophocles, Pericles and Creon

In his *Antigone*, Sophocles was concerned with conflict: the personal clash between Antigone and Creon as well as the antagonism between divine law and the codified law of the state. That Sophocles intended to depict conflict at another level, that of the individual and the *polis*, is implied in his depiction of Creon as a ruler who came to identify the state with himself.<sup>1</sup>

While it would be foolish to read the *Antigone* simply for overt political allusions, those allusions should be recognized for a full appreciation of Sophocles' art and purpose as well as for better comprehension of the real issues in Athens of the mid-fifth century B.C. By placing the play in its historical context of the 440's in Athens, it can be seen that the tragedy of Creon is, on one level, the mirror image of the near tragedy of Pericles.

Creon is portrayed as the ruler of Thebes who states, early in the play:

<sup>1</sup> Victor Ehrenberg, *Sophocles and Pericles* (Oxford 1954) 140, argues that Sophocles knew the fear "... of a policy relying on the intellectual genius and overriding power of one man, capable of putting his reasoning intellect over and against the most sacred traditions."

The intricate connection between Sophocles, Pericles and Creon became apparent on a reading of the *Antigone* for the purpose of understanding the nature of the *polis* as seen by the dramatists. On rereading Ehrenberg's fine study of the two Athenian contemporaries, I found that he argues in much the same manner as I have in this note. He stresses the social function of Greek tragedy and sees traces in Sophocles' works of the impression Pericles had made on the mind of the tragedian. He suggests further that the *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* show a clear challenge to Pericles and the nature of his leadership.

In addition to these points, I see further evidence of interaction in the image called up by the name Creon and in line 1271 near the conclusion of the play, as argued below.