

THE LAODAMIA SIMILE IN CATULLUS 68: REFLECTIONS ON LOVE AND LOSS

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In Catullus' poem 68 he compares his beloved, generally identified as Lesbia, to the mythological figure of Laodamia in a long simile covering 57 lines. Laodamia epitomises the ideal wife, both passionate and loyal and so much in love with her new husband Protesilaus, that she cannot bear to live without him. Therefore she appears to be the perfect comparison for a beloved woman as seen through the eyes of her infatuated lover. But at a closer reading of the poem the interpretation of the simile turns out to be much more complex than that. Lesbia is not loyal and she is not Catullus' wife. He admits both these facts near the end of the poem. Furthermore, Laodamia turns out to have two referents: Lesbia *and* the poet himself. In this paper I will be looking at various interpretations of the Laodamia simile as well as adding my own thoughts on this complex and beautiful poem.

Introduction

It is perhaps unnecessary to defend the principle that mythical *exempla* in ancient poetry are not merely decorative, but serve in the expression of "significant emotion"; it would still be welcome to see it more frequently and more coherently applied (Macleod 1974:82).

In poem 68 Catullus compares the arrival of his *candida diva* (line 70) at the borrowed house where they may share *communes amores* (line 69) to the arrival of Laodamia at the house of her new husband, Protesilaus.¹ It should be clear to any reader that the reference to Laodamia is not a mere ornament to display poetic talent. It comprises such a large piece of the poem (lines 73-130) that it becomes the heart of the second part. But unlike Catullus' other famous mythological poem, 64, which seems narrative at the first read, we are immediately aware of the strong personal element in poem 68. He writes from his own experience in the first person and uses his own name in line 135. Therefore, the reader is immediately more attuned to the implications of the myth within this apparently autobiographical poem. But one has to read very closely to spot *all* implications of the myth. It not only conveys meaning on one level; it is not analogous to Catullus' own situation, but illustrates his situation more clearly through similarity, contrast and innuendo.

Catullus' love affair with Lesbia is the most extraordinary relationship to emerge from his poetry (Adler 1981:129). She is a married woman, also unfaithful to

¹ The unity of the poem is not of concern for this discussion. Therefore, when I refer to poem 68, I mean a single poem of 160 lines, made up of two parts. Part one is a letter to Manlius (lines 1-40) and part two a declaration of thanks to Allius (lines 41-160). All quotes from the Latin are from Garrison 1989; all translations, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

him as her lover, and indifferent towards the pain she causes him. But no matter how unattainable she might be, she remains irresistible. Therefore, to most readers, Catullus' Lesbia poems remain the most attractive. On the one hand this is due to the strong personal element in these poems and his unmasked emotions; on the other, to Catullus' struggle to put these emotions into words. This struggle often leads to strange comparisons and unusual choice of words – this will be the focus of my discussion. Where the everyday language fails him, he relies on comparisons and mythological references for better expression.

Poem 68 is the crown of Catullus' Lesbia-cycle and unique in methodology. He does use myth in other poems, but the mythological figures are never elsewhere compared directly to him or the people in his milieu as in this poem. Although Lesbia is never called by name, it is evident to most scholars that she is the *candida diva* in the description of her unfaithfulness and the reference to her husband. This is the only poem in which Lesbia is directly compared to another woman, a heroine at that, and his wonderment at her becomes even clearer than in poem 51, right at the beginning of their relationship.

But is it only wonderment he wants to illustrate with the myth? The focus is so often on the clarifying function of comparison, but what about the possible mystifying function? Are we left, at the end of the poem, with a better understanding or the exact opposite? Is Lesbia simply Catullus' "divine bride", heroic like Laodamia, or is the poet telling us more by comparing this ideal, loyal wife to his unfaithful mistress? What are the limits of comparison and what are we to make of the implicit association of *Catullus* with Laodamia?

Lastly I will argue that Catullus is entirely conscious of the irony of his simile and, although it seems *prima facie* that he uses Laodamia as an example of the ideal he envisions for Lesbia (and himself), he ironises the impossibility of such a comparison, of Lesbia as a bride. The poet and his contemporary readers were all too aware of the tragedy of Laodamia and by his choice of this comparison, he is indirectly admitting his awareness of the impossibility of success for his relationship.

The nature of comparison and the basic structure of the Laodamia simile

The total volume of similes in poem 68 has no comparison in ancient literature. With the Laodamia simile at the core, running for 57 lines and generating three similes of its own, they are overwhelming in their magnitude. It is exactly this tightly-knit succession of similes which leaves one with the feeling that they are not mere decorations, added to the message of the poem. They *are* the poem; they are the essence of the message (Feeney 1992:34-35, Feeney's italics).

Similes have the power to illustrate and enlighten. This is often the focus of both ancient and modern literary critics as they tend to concentrate on the similitude involved in comparison, thus forcing the reader to seek equivalence between often divergent forms. But there is also a *dissimilarity* inherent in simile. This characteristic was recognised by ancient critics who realised the rhetorical force gained from comparing dissimilar entities, through contrast and inversion. Therefore, they could divide simile into *totum simile*, *impar*, *dissimile* and *contrarium*. Modern critics have

likewise shown that the nature of simile is in fact rooted in difference. Without difference there is only the identical and no motivation for comparison. Thus the powerful impact of the Laodamia myth lies in the similarity as much as the discrepancy between Catullus / Lesbia and Protesilaus / Laodamia (Feeney 1992:35-37).

As Lesbia, the dazzling goddess (*candida diva*) arrives at the *domus* and places her foot on the threshold, Catullus begins his primary simile. Lesbia's arrival is compared to that of the bride Laodamia at the house of Protesilaus. The image of Lesbia is frozen for sixty lines as the simile develops and generates yet more comparisons. Through the reading of these lines and the rest of the poem, the discrepancy between the meaning and the vehicle draws our attention as much as the similitude. Lesbia starts out as a bride and a goddess, and her relationship with Catullus as a marriage, but in the end none of this turns out to be the case (Feeney 1992:39). Catullus may think of Lesbia as a bride through comparing her with Laodamia, but when he leaves the simile behind, he admits that there is no such relationship between them (Macloed 1974:86).

The comparison to Laodamia soon leads Catullus to mention the death of Protesilaus, so soon after the wedding, as the first soldier to die in Troy. The reference to Laodamia's loss of Protesilaus in Troy recalls the loss of Catullus' brother there. Catullus laments his brother in a short divergence from the myth. Here we take first note of the obliquity of comparison for Laodamia now has two referents – the *candida diva* and Catullus. The reader is made aware of the power of the simile to distort and create distance: if the same entity may be compared to two referents, does it bring us closer to, or take us further from, the entity? (Feeney 1992:39-40).

After Catullus' digression in his reference to Troy, we return to Laodamia and the description of her passion generates another simile with a mythical reference. The depth of her passion is compared to the *barathrum* (draining well) which Hercules dug near Pheneus (lines 109-118). Tuplin (1981:132) makes an interesting point:

The metaphor of falling in love, so familiar to us, is distinctly rare in antiquity. The things one falls into tend to be unpleasant ... the ancient reader might well consider the idea of falling in 107 f. as by itself picking the sinister aspect of Laodamia's love.

Tuplin continues to note that the love symbolised by a *barathrum* cannot be escaped. The removal of the object of this love ultimately leads to Laodamia's destruction for she cannot live without him (line 84). This immediately recalls Catullus' love for Lesbia as we have come to know it through his poetry. He cannot escape his love for her despite being aware of her infidelities (line 135). He is therefore, like Laodamia, immersed in a *barathrum* from which he cannot lift himself. Throughout his poetry we find references to his struggle to distance himself from her despite the terrible pain she causes him (e.g. poems 8, 72, 75, 76, 92). Exactly like Laodamia, Catullus is inextricable from his love.

But by the end of the *barathrum* simile (line 117), Laodamia's love is said to be deeper still:

sed tuus altus amor barathro fuit altior illo ...

but your deep love was deeper than that famed abyss ... (119-120, Lee 1990).

In line 119 we are launched into yet another simile for Laodamia's love. The image of an old man's love for his grandchild is striking in two ways. A man's love for his grandchild, even if it is his first and only, seems like a bizarre comparison for a newly-wed wife's love of her husband. However, it recalls the relationship between erotic and familial love seen in poem 72. As in that poem, Catullus is once again using the image of family to show a love that runs deeper than mere sexual obsession. But, once more, Laodamia's love surpasses that of the age-stricken grandfather:

nam nec tam carum confecto aetate parenti / una caput seri nata nepotis alit ...

for not so dear to parent spent with age the head / of late-born grandson nursed by an only daughter ... (Lee 1990).

Before we return to the main simile, there is a final attempt at finding a suitable comparison for Laodamia's love. She is compared to a female dove snatching kisses from her mate more eagerly than the most wanton woman. This comparison once more recalls other poems of Catullus and, by implication, connects him to Laodamia.² In poem 5 he asks of Lesbia *da mi basia mille* and in poem 7 he tells her that he could never have enough of her kisses. But Laodamia once more surpasses the love of the dove:

nec tantum niveo gavisast ulla columbo / compare ...

nor did any dove delight so much in her snowy mate ... (125)

And before returning to reality, to the real woman on the threshold, Catullus restates that Laodamia's love surpasses all three of these comparisons:

sed tu horum magnos vicisti sola furors ...

but you alone surpassed their strong passions... (129)

After lengthy attempts to find comparisons for Laodamia's love, we return to the "real" situation and the fact that Laodamia has herself only been an analogy for the *candida diva*:

aut nihil aut paulo cui tum concedere digna / lux mea se nostrum contulit in gremium

deserving to yield nothing or but little to her, / my light on that day gave herself to [my] lap ... (131-132, Lee 1990).

² Theodorakopoulos 2007:327.

Catullus once again draws attention to the dilemmas of the reader trying to discern the points of similitude. But in what respect is Lesbia like Laodamia? What is the point of comparison? (Feeney 1992:42, Feeney's italics).

Only the arrival of the *candida diva*, at the start and at the end of the simile, is in fact the point of comparison. Everything else we learn about her is inferred. While we learn all about Catullus' love, his *candida diva* remains a blank page to be filled with analogies. All she really does in the poem is to arrive at the *domus* and provide a basis for comparison. Thus the poem leads us to reflect on the difficulty of translating an experience into words (Feeney 1992:42-43).

Williams (1980:51-52) refers to an "arbitrary assertion of similarity" as an important aspect in Catullus' introduction of the myth. There is no immediate explanation for the poet's choice and use of the myth and the reader is only able to understand its significance when the entire poem has been read.

When the poet returns, after the various similes, to Lesbia's arrival at the house in the primary context, he immediately moves on to secondary language once more. He describes Cupid, dressed in the saffron tunic of marriage, circling around Lesbia. Once more the idea is created that Lesbia came to the house as a bride. But as soon as the theme of marriage is recalled, it is refuted. Lesbia is no ideal Roman bride. And also unlike Laodamia with Protesilaus, she is not content with Catullus alone:

*quae tamen etsi uno non est contenta Catullo / rara verecundae furta feremus
erae*

... and although she is not content with Catullus alone, I will endure the few secret passions of my discreet mistress ... (135-136)

With a remarkably calm detachment, he decides to endure her *rara furta* and be satisfied with the few special days she grants him; she is after all not his bride (lines 143-148, Williams 1980:58).

Although its interpretation is complex and manifold, the Laodamia simile is not incomprehensible. Our understanding thereof is suspended, however, until the entire poem has been read (and re-read). By looking back and forth we find points of contact with Catullus' own situation even though the similarities turn out to be different than initially expected. In this way the myth serves a complex, dual function – it creates distance *and* serves as a vehicle for the poet's feelings.

Lesbia as the divine bride

At first sight, Laodamia clearly serves as a comparison for Catullus' *candida diva*, whom we have chosen to identify as Lesbia. But the poet's choice of comparison soon seems bizarre as Lesbia turns out to be anything but like Laodamia.

Catullus thanks Allius for lending him the house in which he could enjoy *communes amores* (shared loves) with his beloved. But Lesbia is not his equal – she is a *domina*, and even more, she is a *diva* (Wiseman 1985:160-161). As Lesbia approaches the house, Catullus is waiting inside. The poet capitalises on the dramatic situation to heighten the feeling of expectation. Expectation creates excitement and

excitement glorifies the awaited object, therefore Lesbia appears godlike in those moments of nervous expectancy (Lyne 1980:55).

After Catullus' romantic recreation of those moments of expectancy, we are brought to the critical moment where Lesbia steps on the threshold. It is the romantic climax, but as soon as she enters the house she will change from the *candida diva* and become a real woman (Lyne 1980:55-56).

But now Catullus postpones the change, he postpones the reality by introducing the myth of Laodamia in a simile stretching over 57 lines. In all probability, as Lyne (1980:56) states, in order to cling as long as possible to those precious moments. But why is Lesbia compared to Laodamia in particular?

According to Lyne (1980:56-57) the answer lies in Catullus' view of his relationship with Lesbia. He regards it as a marriage and thus Laodamia is an obvious choice: she was a loving, passionate and most faithful wife, to such an extent that she could not live without her husband. Therefore, by choosing her, Catullus tries to sustain his romanticised view of Lesbia as a wife.

Wiseman (1985:162-163), on the other hand, refers to Catullus' mythological references as illusions and believes that the real truth only becomes evident in lines 135-140. Although his divine bride is unfaithful, she is still his *era* and in the next simile Catullus identifies himself with Juno in tolerating Jupiter's infidelities. Wiseman therefore believes that this attempt at realism is still based on illusion for Catullus treats Lesbia's infidelities as if she were unfaithful to him. The real Lesbia we only meet in lines 143-146:

Nor yet did she come to me upon her father's arm / to a house fragrant with Assyrian perfume, / but on a wondrous night gave stolen little gifts / taken from the very lap of her husband (Lee 1990).

I do not believe that Catullus was deluding himself. Although at first sight the myth might seem like an idealistic glorification of Lesbia, I believe Catullus indeed uses the myth to point to the reality of his relationship with Lesbia: the discrepancy between Laodamia and Lesbia. Within the myth itself there is already a feeling of unrest, because Laodamia had insulted the gods and suffered as a result. I think the reference to Laodamia is the first step in the "step-by-step collapse of the romantic vision started in lines 70-72" (Lyne 1980:58). This collapse happens first with regard to mythological reference before Catullus moves on to the reality of his real-life situation. In a subtle way the poet prepares the reader for what is to come in lines 135-136 and then for the harsh reality of lines 143-148. He has not, apart from the two lines in which he describes Lesbia's arrival, a romantic vision of her. On that romantic night he merely found her to be incredibly beautiful as she approached him. As Lyne points out, the expectation heightens his passion and makes her godlike in his eyes. This highly erotic image is prepared for by the words in line 69, *communes exercemus amores*, and is continued through the description of Venus in lines 133-134. However, I do not think that the Laodamia simile is a prolongation of this romantic and erotic image, but indeed the step-by-step breakdown thereof. Lesbia and Laodamia might correspond with regard to passion, but they are two extremes where fidelity is concerned, as becomes clear later on in the poem.

At this point the question arises why Catullus would go to such lengths in describing Laodamia's marriage if he could see no resemblance to Lesbia in this regard. The answer lies, once more, in the dual function of the myth: there are both comparison and contrast at play. When Catullus has the similarities between Laodamia and Lesbia in mind, he can imagine her to be his bride. But when he faces reality, he admits that their relationship is nothing of the sort. The myth therefore portrays both a fond memory and a hint of imagination on Catullus' part: Laodamia represents Lesbia as he could have wished her to be (Macleod 1974:86-87).

Catullus therefore gives expression to two contrasting types of love. By comparing Lesbia to Laodamia, he creates an ideal and, at the same time, clearly shows how non-ideal it is in reality. Apart from telling us that the poet was already early-on in his relationship aware of the impossibility of its success, to my mind it points to the evident impossibility of such a comparison. Lesbia is compared to someone she could never be: a loyal wife, madly in love with her husband. And Catullus admits this fact to the reader when he overthrows the beautiful picture he has just created as he turns back from the simile to his own situation. The idealised image is further undone as Catullus next refers to Lesbia's infidelity and then the fact that she did not come to him as a bride.

Wiseman (1985:164) believes that the words *lux mea* at the end of the poem take us back to the dream world Catullus has created for himself. However, I do not think there is any naïveté present here on the poet's part. Even though the last words of the poem might seem highly ironic, I do not see that Catullus is creating any illusions. The fact that Lesbia is still the light of his life is not a denial of the reality. In the same way in which the simile was highly ironic but he admitted his awareness of that fact, he is not falling back to his romanticised view of Lesbia here. He has just decided to bear with her *rara furta* and admitted to be satisfied with the few special days she might grant him. With the death of his brother still painfully present in his conscience, I find it totally credible that she could be the only light left in his life, despite her infidelity. It is a conscious choice on his part for "life and love over all else and at all costs" (Theodorakopoulos 2007:329).

Catullus as Laodamia

In order to understand Catullus' long expansion on the story of Laodamia in his comparison of Lesbia to her, it is also necessary to uncover the *implicit* connections between the myth and the contents of the poem. As discussed above, it was already evident in the shorter similes within the Laodamia comparison (the *barathrum*, grandfather and the passionate dove similes) that her love more resembles Catullus' than Lesbia's. But there are even further connections between them, leaving no doubt with the reader that this is not coincidence on the part of the poet.

In the first place, there is an implicit comparison between Catullus and Laodamia in his prayer to Nemesis lines 77-78:

May nothing please me so strongly, Rhamnusia Maid, / that is rashly started
without those Lords' consent! (Lee 1990).

In other poems we have already seen the poet comparing himself to a woman [e.g. the implicit comparison of Catullus to Ariadne in poem 64]. But the above example adds two further dimensions: marriage and the gods' approval. Laodamia offended the gods and lost her husband as a result (Wiseman, 1985:176). We might well then infer that Catullus is predicting the doom of his own "marriage" to Lesbia.

In the second place, Laodamia's passion resembles Catullus' passion, not Lesbia's. It is the poet who is consumed by his love for his mistress (line 51 ff.), like the mythical Laodamia for her husband (line 107 ff.). About Lesbia's feelings we learn nothing (Macleod 1974:83). And this love of his, like Laodamia's, runs deeper than physical passion and can only be expressed in full via familial terms (Wiseman 1985:176).

An important leitmotif throughout the poem is the *domus* (Miller 2004:52). Allius provided Catullus and his beloved with a *domus* to share their love (line 68), the *domus* of Laodamia and Protesilaus was *frustra incepta* (line 75), and the *domus* of the Valerii Catulli "died" with Catullus' brother in Troy (line 94). Here we find yet another link between Laodamia and Catullus – both of their *domi*, implicating both of their futures, died in Troy.

Similarly, in lines 138-140 Catullus likens himself to Juno in her tolerance of Jupiter's infidelities. But in line 141 he admits that humans should not be likened to gods. Whereas Juno had feelings of bitterness to hold back, Catullus shows a calm tolerance not found in his other Lesbia poems. Secondly, Jupiter's missteps were many (*plurima furta*, line 140), but Lesbia's were *rara furta*. However, Catullus may be compared to the goddess in so far as he was betrayed by his mistress as she was by her husband. By exchanging the roles of the male and female, the poet creates a portrayal of his type of love and the pain that comes with it (Macleod 1974:83-84).

Lastly, Catullus ends his poem with:

et longe ante omnes mihi quae me carior ipso est, / lux mea, qua viva vivere dulce mihi est ...

... and far above all else she who is dearer to me than my own self, my light, whose life makes life sweet to me ... (159-160)

According to Wiseman 1985:164 these lines lend "a superb ending to a superb poem". This recalls lines 105-106:

quo tibi tum casu, pulcherrima Laodamia, / ereptum est vita dulcius atque anima / coniugium ...

... then you were robbed by that fate, most beautiful Laodamia, of the husband who was sweeter to you than life and soul.

Just as Laodamia's husband was sweeter to her than life, Lesbia was the only sweetness in Catullus' life.

Conclusion

In poem 68 Catullus teases the reader by comparing Laodamia to Lesbia and then turning out to be more like Laodamia himself than Lesbia could ever be. By exchanging the roles, Catullus can exploit all possibilities of depicting his complex feelings and perhaps also attempt to understand this mystery called love. "... the result of such complexity is not mere confusion; the myth, by indicating an area of feeling beyond the direct statements of the poem, helps to express a significant conflict of attitudes. It thus makes a distinct and comprehensible contribution to the whole" (Macloed 1974:88).

In poem 68 Catullus sets new standards for the use of myth in an intensely personal poem. Not only is the mythical reference extraordinary in length, but the way in which the poet weaves it into his personal situation, the multiple associations and meanings it generates, as well as the tension created by the inherent contrasts with reality; all these factors contribute to make Catullus' poem 68, in the words of Lyne (1980:52), "the most extraordinary poem in Latin".

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