

THE 'ATTIS' OF CATULLUS

Considerable attention has been paid in recent years to Catullus 63. A number of salient features have been discussed: the psychological study of emotions;¹ the use of animal imagery;² the theme of marriage and love.³ There have also been some helpful studies on smaller, though important, aspects of the poem such as its use of ring composition⁴ or Catullus' inventive treatment of the challenging Galliambic metre.⁵ But little work has been done on the literary background of poem 63 apart from the question of whether or not Catullus was following an Alexandrian model.⁶ I shall suggest that the basic narrative of the poem, and the way in which Catullus has handled it, have literary antecedents which have influenced the poet. The final product, however, still remains a very original piece of work.

The story of poem 63

The basic narrative of poem 63 describes a youthful devotee of Cybele who journeys to the goddess's Phrygian homeland. His enthusiasm for the cult suffers a dramatic reversal once he has reached his destination. A lion is then sent to re-kindle his devotion and ensure his fidelity to the cult. There are four Hellenistic epigrams whose themes have some points of contact with this story.⁷ Some of these parallelisms have been observed, but commentators on Catullus 63 seldom refer to this Greek background.

All four epigrams – by Dioscorides,⁸ Alcaeus, 'Simonides' and Antipater – describe an encounter between a Gallus and a lion in which the lion is frightened off, or otherwise dissuaded, by the beating of the *τύμπανον*. But only those by Dioscorides and Alcaeus⁹ can, with reasonable confidence, be said to come from Meleager's *Garland*, a work which must have provided valuable source material for the Roman 'new' poets. They are also the epigrams which show the closest links with Catullus' poems.

¹ See E. Schäfer, *Das Verhältnis von Erlebnis und Kunstgestalt bei Catull* (Wiesbaden, 1966), 95–107.

² See G. N. Sandy, 'The Imagery of Catullus 63', *TAPA* 99 (1968), 389ff.

³ See Ph. Y. Forsyth, 'The Marriage Theme in Catullus 63', *CJ* 66 (1970–1), 6ff., and J. Glenn, 'The Yoke of Attis', *CP* 68 (1973), 59ff.

⁴ See D. A. Traill, 'Catullus LXIII: Rings around the Sun', *CP* 76 (1981), 211f.

⁵ See R. C. Ross, 'Catullus 63 and the Galliambic Meter', *CJ* 64 (1968–9), 145ff.

⁶ D. Mulroy in 'Hephaestion and Catullus 63', *Phoenix* 30 (1976), 61ff. strengthens the case for the originality of poem 63. Others, like Fordyce, simply assume with little or no argument that an Alexandrian model existed. Wilamowitz suggests Callimachus as a model for Catullus, a view given some approval by Gow (in *JHS* 80 (1960), 88ff.).

⁷ The epigrams are: Dioscorides 16, Alcaeus 21, 'Simonides' 2 and Antipater 64 (in Gow and Page, *The Greek Anthology, Hellenistic Epigrams*). Gow and Page discuss the relative order of the epigrams in their preface to Dioscorides 16. The epigrams are also discussed by Gow in *JHS* 80 (1960), 88ff. Gow's main concern is with the meanings of the words referring to cult objects. But he does note the similarity between Alcaeus' lion and that of Catullus.

⁸ Dioscorides' epigram is probably the earliest. However we do not know the real author of the epigram ascribed to Simonides.

⁹ 'Simonides' and Antipater repeat Dioscorides' notion of a Gallus sheltering in a cave from a storm. Both epigrams are very alike and must either share a common source or echo each other. If the latter, Antipater could be seen as embellishing the basic story of 'Simonides' by adding details of the eunuch's feminine appearance.

Dioscorides' epigram contains all of the main episodes which we find in poem 63's narrative. Atys,¹⁰ a devotee of Cybele, is on a journey; his enthusiasm wanes; after the lion's attack he regains his enthusiasm. There are also a number of more detailed correspondences between Dioscorides and Catullus.¹¹ It may well be possible, however, to go further back than Dioscorides himself in seeking a literary background to Catullus 63.

It is evident from the setting of Dioscorides' epigram that he makes some use of Hermesianax (the earliest literary source on the Attis cult which has survived). According to Plutarch (7.17.9–12) Hermesianax gave a version¹² of the Attis legend in which Attis, a eunuch from birth, and son of the Phrygian Calaus, went to Lydia where he introduced the orgies of Cybele. As a result he aroused the anger of Zeus who sent a wild boar which caused the death of Attis. Although Dioscorides does not mention the boar, he describes the same crusading journey as Hermesianax.

It is also possible that Dioscorides was influenced by an earlier epigram of Leonidas. Leonidas L111 (Gow and Page, *The Greek Anthology* = *AP* 6.221) is our earliest literary source for the theme, common to all four of the Gallus epigrams, of a lion unexpectedly sparing its potential victims. As in the later epigrams of 'Simonides' and Antipater, the victims – shepherds in Leonidas – are sheltering in wintry weather. The lion shelters in the same place, but does not harm the shepherds or their herds. In gratitude for their escape, the shepherds dedicate a painting of the event to Zeus.

This epigram of Leonidas, and perhaps the painting it accompanies, may well have suggested his basic theme to Dioscorides, who then varied the story by changing the shepherds into a Gallus. The reason for this variation may be provided by lines 7–8 where Dioscorides observes that while even bold men would fear a lion, a lion would cause 'unspeakable alarm' to a Gallus. Dioscorides thus succeeds in heightening the pathos of the story.¹³ A further alteration which may also have had some influence upon Catullus, is that Dioscorides' Cybele, unlike Zeus in Leonidas, has a positive role to play. It is she herself who suggests to the Gallus that he should use his tambourine to frighten off the lion.

Alcaeus' epigram is broadly similar to that of Dioscorides. But there are two variations, one major, which suggest that Catullus did not depend solely upon Dioscorides and his sources. Like Catullus, but unlike Dioscorides, Alcaeus sets his lion episode upon Mt Ida. More significantly Alcaeus' presentation of his lion is quite different from that of both Dioscorides and Leonidas. At the same time, it has obvious parallels with Catullus.

The lion in Alcaeus is not frightened off but is itself converted to the Cybele cult by the playing of the tambourine:

...ἐκ δὲ τενόντων
ἔνθους ῥομβητὴν ἔστροφάλιζε φόβῃν.

(Alcaeus 21.7–8)

¹⁰ The form Atys, as Gow suggests *ad loc.*, seems to show an attempt to link the Attis of the Cybele cult to the Atys of the Lydian royal family who was killed by a boar.

¹¹ Dioscorides, like Catullus, emphasises the frenzy of his Atys. Dioscorides sets his story against the dark of evening. Catullus sets the first half of his poem against the dark woods of Cybele. Catullus' description of the noise of the tympanon (21 and 29) is a virtual translation of Dioscorides' account in line 11.

¹² Pausanias also mentions the local legend in Achaia where Attis is not impotent at birth but is caused to castrate himself by the anger of Agdistis at his marriage with the daughter of the king of Phrygia.

¹³ The pathos is further increased when the lion's flight is compared with that of a lion's typical victim – a deer.

This description of the lion is remarkably close to Catullus' account of his lion which is in fact one of the lions drawing Cybele's chariot. As Cybele attempts to rekindle the enthusiasm of Attis she urges the lion:

rutilam ferox torosa cervice quate iubam.¹⁴

Once more as with Dioscorides, it is possible to detect an earlier work, on this occasion a work of art, which may have influenced Alcaeus, and so indirectly Catullus, in his unusual version of the lion's reaction. Commentators have noted the existence of an ancient picture alluded to in Varro who enquires:

non vidisti simulacrum leonis ad Idam eo loco ubi quondam subito eum cum vidissent quadrupedem Galli tympanis adeo fecerunt mansuem ut tractarent manibus? (*Sat. Menipp.* 364)

Here, against the setting of Mt Ida, we have a lion which is not routed by the tambourine (as in Dioscorides) but is instead converted as in Alcaeus to the Cybele cult. This association then reappears in Catullus where the lion actually belongs to Cybele.

It should by now be clear that many of the basic features in the narrative of poem 63 can be paralleled in earlier literature and art. Like Dioscorides and Alcaeus, Catullus' lion encounters a Gallus.¹⁵ The sequence of events in Catullus follows the main episodes in Dioscorides: a journey concerned with the cult of Cybele, a change of heart in the Gallus, and a subsequent re-kindling of his devotion. The setting in Catullus matches that in Alcaeus; while from Alcaeus too Catullus may have borrowed his Cybele-inspired lion. Again, the positive role of Cybele in Catullus' poem may be seen as a development of the active part which Cybele plays in Dioscorides. There is also the possibility – but this must remain speculative – that Dioscorides' lion, like Catullus' had the function of re-kindling the enthusiasm of the Gallus. Finally, behind the epigram tradition lie some works of art which can thus be seen as an indirect influence upon Catullus 63.¹⁶

There are, however, a number of important differences from this earlier tradition in Catullus' handling of the Gallus–lion encounter. These too are worth investigating for the light they throw upon Catullus' technique as a poet. Only in Catullus is the lion actually sent by Cybele. Again, in Catullus alone we get the ending which we expect – the lion remains hostile to its victim and its attack is not thwarted. Finally, in Catullus Attis is compelled against his will to worship Cybele, whereas in epigrams the Gallus (or shepherds) voluntarily make an offering to the deity involved.

As we shall see, all these novelties are facets of a new slant which Catullus gives to the lion–Gallus encounter.

¹⁴ Both Alcaeus and Catullus may be compared in their description of the lion's behaviour to Hellenistic accounts of Cybele-inspired head-tossing. There are obvious parallels with, for example, Antipater (who echoes Alcaeus) 64.1–2 (Gow and Page, *op. cit.*) or Leonidas 44.5–6 (Gow and Page, *op. cit.*) or Philip 14.3–4 (Gow and Page, *The Garland of Philip*). For another reference to this activity in Catullus 63, again applied to an animal, see my observations in 'The Iuvenca Image in Catullus 63', *CQ* n.s. 36 (1986), 268ff.

¹⁵ While Catullus, Dioscorides and Alcaeus all depart from Leonidas where the lion meets a shepherd, it is interesting to note how Catullus stresses the shepherd-like qualities of his Attis. See in particular G. N. Sandy, *loc. cit.* n. 2 above. H. J. Rose in 'Anchises and Aphrodite', *CQ* 18 (1924), 11ff. cites many parallels for a goddess who is a *πότνια θηρῶν* having a shepherd-lover. Roman art in particular concentrates on the role of Attis as a shepherd loved by Cybele – cf. M. J. Vermaseren, *The Legend of Attis in Greek and Roman Art* (Leiden, 1966).

¹⁶ Professor Nisbet draws my attention to Hor. *Odes* 1.22.15 where the love-sick poet is spared by a wolf. See Nisbet and Hubbard *ad loc.*

The role of the lion in poem 63

The dominant role of Cybele together with the prominence of the master/slave contrast throughout the poem have been duly noted¹⁷ but no comment has been made on the significance of this theme for Catullus' handling of the lion episode. If we look at the most detailed treatment of the runaway slave motif in Greek poetry – the first *Idyll* of Moschus¹⁸ – we see at once that Catullus plays upon this motif throughout the episode of the lion's encounter with Attis.

Virtually the whole of Moschus' poem is an appeal by Cypris to find her son Eros. She explains

δραπετίδας ἐμός ἐστιν

(Moschus, *Idyll* 1.3)

and promises a reward for his re-capture. To help with this, she gives a detailed description of his appearance (lines 6–23). She ends with instructions to treat her runaway without pity:

ἦν τύ γ' ἔλῃς τῆνον, δῆσας ἄγε μηδ' ἐλέησῃς.

(Moschus, *Idyll* 1)

The same sequence of events can be found in Catullus.

In the dawn monologue, which immediately precedes the lion episode, Attis for the first time in the poem describes himself as an *erifuga* (51, previously he had merely been an *exul*) and, a mere six lines before the lion is aroused, he explicitly sees himself as Cybele's slave (68). When Cybele realises his desire to escape she appeals, like Cypris in Moschus, to a *fugitivarius* – the lion – to recapture her runaway:

fac uti furoris ictu reditum in nemora ferat
mea libere nimis qui fugere imperia cupit.

(79–80)

Cybele does not give a detailed description of her runaway, as Cypris does. But there is a description of Attis in line 80's phrase

...qui fugere imperia cupit.

Since Attis is the only person running away from Cybele (his companions have long been forgotten) this brief description is sufficient to allow the lion to recognise Attis.¹⁹

Like Cypris, Cybele urges her slave-catcher to be harsh. The lion is told to 'strike' him with madness (*furoris ictu*, 79) and the re-capture is seen as an attack (*facit impetum*, 89). In real-life situations slave-catchers were expected to be harsh. The slave might be beaten. He would certainly be bound and brought back to his master as a prisoner.²⁰ The re-capture of Attis, however, does seem particularly harsh. The lion,

¹⁷ See in particular C. A. Rubino, 'Myth and Mediation in Catullus 63', *Ramus* 3 (1974), 152ff.

¹⁸ Moschus' idyll appears to have inspired Meleager 37 (Gow and Page, op. cit.) where Love tries to hide from Meleager in Zenophila's eyes. Meleager 38 may again use the slave motif where it describes Love as someone to be sold. Love as a runaway slave may also be alluded to in Asclepiades 22 (Gow and Page, op. cit.) where Love is described as ...ἐκ μητρὸς ἔτ' εὐθήρατος ἀποπτάς.

¹⁹ It is however also possible that no detailed description would be necessary since Cybele's lion could be assumed to recognise one of her worshippers. Cf. Cairns n. 20 below on P. Oxy. 1643 where a *fugitivarius* is appointed who already knows the runaway and can thus track him down more readily.

²⁰ Useful references for this practice are to be found in F. J. Cairns, 'Propertius 2.29A', *CQ* 21 (1971), 456–7. To Moschus 1 and Xen. *Mem.* 2.20, Cairns adds some interesting late material from P. Oxy. 1423 and P. Oxy. 1643. For advertisements for lost slaves see Petron. 97.2.

a naturally fierce animal, is made even more ferocious at Cybele's command and her words to the lion constantly emphasise this characteristic. Virtually every line of her speech alludes to fierce behaviour.

An explanation of this ferocity which at the same time serves to confirm the role of the lion as that of a *fugitivarius* is to be found in the phrase which Cybele uses as her description of Attis. The lion is told to pursue the individual

mea libere nimis qui fugere imperia cupit. (80)

At first glance the phrase 'libere nimis' is a little surprising. As only Attis is seeking to escape Cybele it would seem sufficient to tell the lion to pursue whoever was running away. But the further detail of 'libere nimis' in fact makes excellent sense in the light of the Roman attitude to runaway slaves.

In stipulating the punishment for runaways Roman law distinguished those runaway slaves who pretended to be free from those who did not. The former were punished more severely when caught. *Dig.* 11.4.2 declares: '...si pro liberis se (sc. fugitivi) gesserint, gravius coerceri solent'²¹ Seen against this legal background, 'libere nimis' thus suggest that Attis, regarded by Cybele as her slave, affects to be a free man as he seeks to escape. This attempt at deception justifies, in Roman law, the emphasis on harsh treatment of Attis in Cybele's commands to her slave-catching lion.

Catullus has thus added a completely new dimension to the Gallus-lion encounter. Attis, though affecting to be free, is the runaway slave of Cybele and the lion is sent by her as a slave catcher²² to enforce his return. All the novelties in Catullus' treatment of the Gallus-lion encounter make sense when we see them in the light of Attis' portrayal as a runaway slave.

Before leaving poem 63 I would like to make a tentative suggestion about why Catullus may have been attracted to the runaway slave analogy. Previous commentators have on a number of occasions drawn attention to possible erotic allusions in the language of Catullus 63.²³ Catullus' awareness of the Attis/Cybele love story has also been noted.²⁴ If we look at poem 63 as the work of a love poet much aware of earlier, particularly Hellenistic, love verse then we may recall that the lover is not infrequently seen as the slave of his beloved²⁵ and, on occasions, as a runaway slave anxious to escape from his own passion. One epigram of Meleager²⁶ seems particularly

²¹ Cf. Cairns, loc. cit. 458.

²² The slave-catching role is an easy development from the lion's function as the herder of Cybele's flock to which Attis belongs. Cf. Sandy n. 2 above and Watson in *Mnemosyne* 36 (1983), 156ff.

²³ See (as well as Forsyth n. 2 above) G. N. Sandy, 'Catullus 63 and the Theme of Marriage', *AJP* 92 (1971), 181ff. Granarolo, *L'Oeuvre de Catulle* (Paris, 1967), sees poem 63 as '(une) sorte d'anti-epithalame'. D. Ross describes the Attis as 'erotic psychology at its most unnatural' [*Background to Augustan Poetry*, p. 17]. Several studies of poem 63 have suggested links between the Attis/Cybele story and the love affair of Catullus and Lesbia: see P. W. Harkins, 'Autoallegory in Catullus 63 and 64', *TAPA* 90 (1959), 102ff.; and T. J. Sienkewicz, 'Catullus another Attis?', *CB* 67 (1981), 37ff.

²⁴ See J. Basto, 'Caecilius, Attis and Catullus 35', *LCM* 7 (1982), 30ff., A. M. Guillemin, 'Le Poème 63 de Catulle', *REL* 27 (1949), 149ff. and G. N. Sandy, loc. cit. n. 23 above. In the Phrygian version of the Attis myth Cybele loves Attis (Pausanias 7.17) and even has a child by him (Diodorus 3.58 where Cybele is the daughter of a king). In Hdt. 1.30 Attis is described as νεόγαμος. When he forgets his love for Cybele she causes his self-castration (Ovid, *Met.* 4.221ff.).

²⁵ See Callimachus 4 (Gow and Page, op. cit.), Meleager 67 (ibidem), F. O. Copley, 'Servitium Amoris in the Roman Elegists', *TAPA* 78 (1947), 285ff. and R. O. A. M. Lyne in *CQ* 29 n.s. (1979), 117ff.

²⁶ Meleager 17 (Gow and Page, op. cit.).

close to the situation of Catullus 63. Meleager or, more precisely, his soul, has attempted to escape from love. He warns his soul of the fate which will befall it if Love should succeed in re-capturing it:

αὐτίκα γάρ, λήθαργε κακῶν, πάλιν εἴ σε φυγοῦσαν
λήψεται Ἔρως, εὐρὼν δραπέτιν αἰκίσεται.

In Catullus Attis attempts to escape from his mad devotion to Cybele who behaves precisely as Meleager fears that Eros will. She seeks out her runaway and by means of her lion ensures that he is cruelly treated and forced into submission.²⁷

The above analysis of poem 63 casts interesting light on a new poet at work. The poem can be seen as a variation upon Greek epigram's treatment of an encounter between a Gallus and a lion. Catullus has altered this story by giving it the ending we would expect – the lion succeeds in routing its victim. But at the same time he complicates the narrative by presenting the lion in the role of a Roman slave-catcher. The runaway slave motif may also itself be a variation on the traditional love poet's fictitious claim to be a runaway slave anxious to escape from love. Catullus, aware of the traditional Attis/Cybele love story, varies the poetic conceit to portray his Attis as a genuine runaway. His rejected mistress enforces his return by employing a savage slave-catcher.*

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²⁷ If Attis is indeed an unwilling lover-slave his situation is then a pathetic reversal of his happy komastic past (65–7) where he was free to admit, or exclude, his own lover-slaves (cf. Plato, *Sym.* 183a where komastic behaviour is described as a form of ἐθελοδοουλεία).

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