

Liat Arginteanu

Catullus vs. Ovid: Poetry and the Minotaur

Mythology is a window into the ancient world, a portal that allows us to look into another time and analyze its values. As a result, mythology has been used as a vessel to promote one's own beliefs: stories can be told and retold in such a way as to convey completely different priorities. Catullus and Ovid are both prolific poets who have written poetry regarding a myriad of topics, including mythology. Their poetry overlaps in their writings on the myth of the Minotaur, which they both employ to deliberate the profound effects of love and grief, utilizing Ariadne and Theseus as vessels. Catullus precedes Ovid, explaining his influence on Ovid's poetry. Yet their portrayals of Ariadne differ significantly. Understanding the unique lives and experiences of each author is crucial to develop a deep analysis of the differing nature of their poetry. Catullus had a close relationship with heartbreak: the loss of his love, Lesbia, wounded him deeply. This emotional turmoil may very well have affected his understanding of heartbreak, and his deep love of Lesbia may have changed his opinion of women. Thus it is interesting, but not surprising, that Catullus' Ariadne is much more emotionally compelling than Ovid's. Catullus presents Ariadne with a captivating mix of grief and fury, confusion and purpose, and humanity and strength. Her contradictions, much like Catullus' winding style of writing, may at first seem counterproductive, but in the end lend to a gripping portrayal of this classic myth. Ariadne garners sympathy from readers, treating them as confidants as they live through her woes together. Conversely, while Ovid is similarly compelling in his portrayal of grief, his one-dimensional, helpless Ariadne is only exacerbated by his step-by-step retelling of her experiences. She is still only a mythological character, her stories having been retold to us

impersonally. It is important to note both the similarities and differences between Catullus' and Ovid's writing styles and portrayals of Ariadne, as they indicate the perspectives and personal experiences of the poets.

Ariadne's grief and remorse are all encompassing in both Catullus 64 and Ovid's *Heroides X*. Catullus' interest in heartbreak is from the perspective of someone who has been scorned; perhaps he understands this devastated viewpoint from his own lost love, Lesbia. His writing clearly outlines the pervading nature of heartache: "That woman, having been destroyed, was depending on you, Theseus, with her whole chest, with her whole spirit, with her whole mind" (70, 71). Ariadne's grief is felt to her core. She has been deliberately betrayed by her betrothed, for whom she sacrificed all familial ties, leaving her with nothing. Similarly, Ovid writes that Ariadne's deep heartbreak drives her to find misery in everything around her; as she calls out Theseus' name along the shore, she laments that "the hollow rocks sent back your name to me [...] The very place felt the will to aid me in my woe." Catullus and Ovid similarly focus on the topic of Ariadne's anguish over her lost lover, each uses her voice to cry out the wails of someone who has been forsaken; they use Ariadne to ponder the depth of pain that betrayal can cause. Poetry often utilizes allegories and myths to analyze human truths, so Catullus and Ovid's use of Ariadne to interpret grief is not a surprise. Bound by their common identities as poets, they spin words into artwork that contains the secrets of the human soul.

Both Catullus and Ovid employ the use of monologues to acquaint readers with Ariadne; however, while Ariadne retells her story in Ovid's poem, she experiences Theseus' betrayal with the readers in Catullus 64. Catullus' Ariadne is more relatable: hearing Ariadne's thought process first hand enables readers to understand her perspective and to relate to her emotions. Catullus writes Ariadne's monologue from line 132 to line 201. Readers follow along as she

realizes that she is left alone, lost, with no one to turn to: ““For where might I return myself? Destroyed, what hope do I lean on?”” (187) As readers experience her shock turn into grief and fury, they are able to fully understand Ariadne’s thinking process and her emotional journey. Catullus’ writing style, which twists and contorts (through time) much like a labyrinth, also adds to the compelling nature of Ariadne’s voice: she seems scatterbrained and emotionally confused, the shock having muddled her brain. Likewise, Ovid writes in Ariadne’s voice throughout the letter, as she takes readers through the mournful process of her abandonment. However, Ovid’s script differs in that Ariadne is retelling her experience, not experiencing it with readers. Ariadne reminisces, beginning with “fear struck away my sleep” and ending with ““twill yet be you who bear away my bones.”” Ariadne’s emotional turmoil is made almost impersonal as she recounts it step by step, and this is emphasized by Ovid’s orderly writing style.

Catullus has Ariadne beg the gods for revenge, while Ovid has her call out bleakly for the return of Theseus while capitulating to her likely death. As such, Catullus portrays Ariadne as strong and willful, while Ovid depicts her as helpless. Catullus gives Ariadne a sort of weary wisdom, which is forced perhaps by prolonged grief: ““Now let no woman believe in the words of a man promising, let no woman hope the speakings of a man to be faithful”” (149, 150). He describes her passionate calls for vengeance: ““I, having been forsaken, will demand from the gods a just punishment, and I will pray for the faith of the gods in the final hour”” (200, 201). In Catullus’ work, Ariadne is left abandoned and emotionally wounded after Theseus’ departure, but she is not left broken. She is strong in her calls for retribution and in her newly mistrustful mindset; she is not naive anymore. Catullus gives Ariadne strength even in her weakest moment, and his layered character development leads to a more immersive, relatable story. Conversely, Ovid portrays Ariadne as entirely helpless at the loss of Theseus: ““Oft do I come again to the

couch that once received us both, but was fated never to show us together again, and touch the imprint left by you.” Ariadne is purposeless without Theseus, wondering what she might do on her own other than cry, and how she might protect herself: “Now, I ponder over not only what I am doomed to suffer, but all that any woman left behind can suffer.” Ovid writes Ariadne with one emotion: grief. He gives her no other purpose besides loving and being loved by Theseus. Thus, his portrayal of Ariadne is fundamentally unrelatable: humans, by nature, are complex and purposeful, unable to feel and hope for one thing. Catullus describes Ariadne with raging fury and vengeful purpose; Ovid’s words portray her with debilitating sadness and listless helplessness. Catullus’ accurate characterization of the natural strength that women possess is unconventional for his time, but not surprising from the lens of his personal life. His poetry may suggest traces of a deep love for Lesbia, who would never return his love. Perhaps he identified with the pain of unrequited love, or perhaps his strong admiration for Lesbia inspired a more modern perspective on women’s equality unique for his era. In contrast, Ovid’s Ariadne represents the contemporaneous perception of women; Roman society in the first century did not promote equality between men and women and generally relegated women to an obedient, subservient role to men.

Many factors contribute to the differences in two bodies of writing. Catullus and Ovid both used Ariadne as the focus of their poetry to study grief and strength and the relationship between the two. Catullus’ own heartbreak, as catalogued in his other poetry, may have left him with a deeper understanding of heartbreak and of loss, leading to his multi-layered portrayal of the grieving Ariadne. Catullus’ mini epic structure affords Ariadne the opportunity to engage readers by narrating her tale as it is unfolding, while also transcending chronology as her descriptive powers move back and forward in time. In contrast, Ovid’s verses recall a story that

has recently occurred. Readers are exposed to Ariadne's lament, but in a manner less intimate—more as spectators than participants. Catullus may be motivated by his own personal sorrow, as seen in the rebalancing of gender roles in his poetry; his deep love for Lesbia could have affected his perspective of women. Ovid's writing is influenced more by the views of his time. The writings of these poets reveal much about each man's perspective on romance: one might suspect that they believe true love, at its most pure and ideal, is a bold fiction, much like myth.