

## A HOMERIC ECHO IN CATULLUS 51

Ille mi par esse deo videtur,  
 ille, si fas est, superare divos

The second line of Catullus 51 has long been recognized as the poet's first significant departure from his model, Sappho 31. In this line Catullus has variously been interpreted as '[enhancing] the idea [of the first line] and [adding] the characteristically Roman conventional formula of caution *si fas est*',<sup>1</sup> or as including 'a trace of Roman *religio*',<sup>2</sup> or, alternatively, as '[capping] a statement by going further in the same direction'.<sup>3</sup>

There is, however, an even earlier departure from Sappho in Catullus' poem, and it suggests an altogether different purpose for the second line. In the first line Catullus renders Sappho's plural *θεοῖς* with the singular *deo*. It is a seemingly minor change, but not an unmotivated one. Metre cannot account for it, since *deo* and *deis* are metrically equivalent. So what does Catullus achieve with this modification?

I believe he is echoing the Homeric formula *δαίμονι ἴσος*, 'equal to a supernatural force'. This phrase is used nine times in the *Iliad* and once in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Seven of its ten occurrences belong to a single context: a warrior attacking a divinity, or attacking in defiance of a divinity. Thus Diomedes is *δαίμονι ἴσος* when he pursues Aeneas while the latter is under Apollo's protection (*Il.* 5.438). Diomedes is later described as *δαίμονι ἴσος* yet again when his attacks on Aphrodite and Ares are recounted (*Il.* 5.459, 5.884). Patroclus is *δαίμονι ἴσος* when he attacks Apollo, and again when Apollo initiates the sequence of events that will bring about Patroclus' death (*Il.* 16.705, 16.786). Achilles too is so described when he makes an attempt on Apollo-defended Hector, and again when he runs afoul of the river Scamander (*Il.* 20.447, 21.227).

From this background it is clear that when Catullus departs from Sappho in his second line, he does so to gloss *par deo*. *Ille superare divos* [*videtur*] directs the reader to the context in which the original Homeric formula *δαίμονι ἴσος* appears: humans attempting to surmount (*superare*) the gods.

The phrase *si fas est* may offer some confirmation on this point, since *fas* derives from the root *fa-*, 'to speak'.<sup>4</sup> Although this may not quite amount to an Alexandrian footnote,<sup>5</sup> if the root-meaning of *fas* is active in this passage, the word may at least be proof of a certain self-consciousness on the translator's part.

<sup>1</sup> C.J. Fordyce, *Catullus, A Commentary* (Oxford, 1961), 219.

<sup>2</sup> R. Ellis, *A Commentary on Catullus* (Oxford, 1889), 176.

<sup>3</sup> D.F.S. Thomson, *Catullus, Edited with a Textual and Interpretive Commentary* (Toronto, 1997), 327.

<sup>4</sup> *TLL* 6.287.59–67. Ellen Greene has read this phrase as an element of Catullus' gendered reworking of the Sapphic original, observing that *si fas est* 'evokes the moral hierarchies and responsibilities associated with the socio-political order, an order from which Roman women were largely excluded.' E. Greene, 'Refiguring the feminine voice: Catullus translating Sappho', *Arethusa* 32 (1999), 1–18, at 4.

<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see S. Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry* (Cambridge, 1998), 1–5, citing D.O. Ross, Jr, *Backgrounds to Augustan Poetry: Gallus, Elegy and Rome* (Cambridge, 1975), 78. N. Horsfall, 'Virgil and the illusory footnote', *PLLS* 6 (1990), 49–63, offers a thorough examination of this phenomenon in Virgil. For an early discussion, see E. Norden, *Aeneis, Buch VI* (Leipzig, 1903), 122–4.

When Catullus writes *si fas est*, he might be understood not only to mean ‘if it is lawful’, but also ‘if it is *speak-able*’ – in other words, ‘if I may depart from a strict translation of my source’.

Ironically, this departure from Sappho may actually reflect a more profound engagement with the original poem than has been recognized. Sappho’s poem is, as Leah Rissman has shown, full of latent Homeric resonances.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps Catullus deviates from the letter of his model in order to demonstrate his awareness of its deeper workings.

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<sup>6</sup> L. Rissman, *Love as War: Homeric Allusion in the Poetry of Sappho*, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie, Heft 157 (Königstein, 1983), 72–90.

### AMPHRYSIA VATES (AENEID 6.398)

Virgil is known for the care with which he chooses his epithets, but one such choice has received too little attention: in *Aeneid* 6, as the Sibyl is about to respond to the boatman Charon’s complaint about living people coming to the underworld, the poet calls her *Amphrysia uates* (6.398). Beginning with Servius, commentators have been roughly unanimous in their treatment of the word:

Apollinea: et est longe petitum epitheton. nam Amphrysus fluius est Thessaliae, circa quem Apollo spoliatus diuinitate a Ioue irato Admeti regis pauit armenta ideo, quia occiderat Cyclopos, fabricatores fulminum, quibus Aesculapius extinctus est, Apollinis filius, quia Hippolytum ab inferis herbarum potentia reuocauerat.

The literary history of the word, like its root meaning, provides no mystery: Callimachus (*Hymn* 2.48–9) was seemingly the first to connect this river with this episode, and the *Aeneid* passage under discussion is the first appearance of the adjective in Latin; the first reference to Apollo’s connection with this place is also in Virgil, at *Georgics* 3.2: *pastor ab Amphryso*.<sup>1</sup> But if the basic sense and origin of the word have not caused any problems, its application here has.

To understand Virgil’s choice of epithet, it is necessary to look more closely at the scene in which it appears. When Aeneas and the Sibyl approach Charon, he rebukes Aeneas and says that he did not happily transport Hercules or Theseus and Pirithous, and then mentions that the former took Cerberus, and the latter two tried to take Proserpina (6.392–7). The Sibyl is called *Amphrysia* just before offering the following response:

<sup>1</sup> On Virgil’s allusion to Callimachus in the *Georgics* passage, see R.F. Thomas, *Virgil Georgics Volume 2: Books III–IV* (Cambridge, 1988), 37.