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Ego Maenas: The Construction of Female Sexuality in Catullus 63

The story of the castrated Attis in Catullus 63 has recently stimulated discussion on questions of gender and the construction of male sexuality in antiquity (Skinner, *Helios* 20 [1993] 107-30). In this paper, rather than viewing Attis as a *notha mulier* or quasi-feminine, I argue that the hero-turned-heroine adopts important aspects of the female. A close examination of Attis' ritual frenzy reveals a conflation in the narrative of the rites of Cybele with those of Bacchus. The ritual element, however, may not be dismissed as a grotesque or merely exotic decor; on the contrary, both the depiction of Attis' maenadic activity and the images of resistance to mistress Cybele that follow reveal Catullus' manipulation of the *topos* of female resistance to sexual initiation and the bridal transition. Through this interpretation the use of the ritual element becomes essential to the construction of Attis' gender, since s/he is cast as a virgin in the manner of the virginal brides of Catullus 61 and 62 and of Ariadne in 64. The poem thus displays Attis' failure not only as male but also as female to complete the transition from virginity to adult married status.

Evidence of conflation of the orgiastic rites of Cybele and Dionysus dates as early as Aeschylus (56 Nauck) and is also amply attested in Euripides' *Bacchae* (55-9, 120-34). Attis addresses his companions as *Gallae* (12, 36), a term used to describe the worshippers of Bacchus (*Etym. M.* 220). In the poem, Attis in his frenzied speech urges his companions to rush to the mountains where the maenads toss their ivy-crowned head. In the ensuing description, Attis and his companions assume the previously described characteristics of the Phrygian maenads, engaging in what appears to be a Bacchic orgy.

Attis' behavior may be illuminated if we turn to Greek practices of ritual maenadism. As Seaford has shown (*Reciprocity and Ritual*, Oxford 1994), in Greek ritual, maenadism is a benign communal negation of female adherence to the household. Seaford identifies a pattern of maenadism as it operates in Greek tragedy. Accordingly, maenadic behavior is occasioned by features such as resistance to the male. This resistance may take the form of negation of the bridal transition. Women who participate in this negation are frequently portrayed as maenads, actual or metaphorical. Thus, according to Seaford, in tragedy, the image of Bacchic frenzy followed by the maenadic departure from home is associated with the negation of marriage ritual and the destruction of the household.

I argue that Catullus adapts and manipulates this pattern of maenadic activity to create a unique portrait of female sexuality. Attis' adoption of maenadism represents the first stage of his feminization marked by the young man's act of self-castration while in a Bacchic frenzy. Moreover, at the climax of his maenadic activity, Attis is likened to a heifer running from the yoke (33). This type of imagery, a *topos* in both Greek and Latin literature, indicates female resistance to sexual initiation and the negation of the bridal transition. Attis' lament when he realizes that he is separated from his homeland and his social environment (59) corresponds to images of bridal anxiety at the prospect of separation from the maternal household found in the Catullan *epithalamia* (61.82; 62.59-66; 64.118-9).

In addition, as anthropological studies have shown, the individual's passage from the group of adolescents to the adult group is an important loss, emotional and otherwise (Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago 1960). In ritual, the resistance of the losing group is expressed by rites of capture or rape. The bride's forceful separation from her maternal household survives in the other Catullan *epithalamia*. Similarly, in 63, Attis is forced by the goddess to remain her slave. The image of Cybele untying the lion's yoke stands as a symbol of her domination over Attis but also evokes the former image of the youth's resistance to the yoke, as Attis still resists the goddess (80, 86). The poem thus carefully constructs Attis as female, challenging gender distinctions and excluding Attis from all society, in a permanent state of liminality.