

12 Catullus c. 64 – Ariadne, dressed and yet naked

In this chapter we will take a look at Catullus' description of the heroine Ariadne (c. 64). It is the only passage where (Greek) female clothing is mentioned in Catullus' work. The poem has been discussed many times in research.¹ The following section will therefore only deal with Ariadne's clothing and its poetic function. In contrast to Lucretius (A 11), Catullus uses the mention of clothes to direct our view not only to an individual woman (Ariadne), but to her beauty (*forma*) manifesting itself in the unveiled parts of her body. The description of Ariadne's physical appearance forms part of a sultry eroticism ancient male poets and readers liked very much: The erotic woman in distress (a premise still seen in more modern adventure movies, where the hero rescues a buxom damsel in skimpy or even torn clothing).

The description of Ariadne is found in Catullus' famous short epic poem (epyllion) 64. At the heart of the poem stands the *ekphrasis* of the purple cover on the *lectus genialis* (marriage bed) of Thetis (50–264). The sheet is decorated with mythological figures and scenes.² Catullus picks out a vignette containing the myth of the heroine Ariadne. He retells her story, beginning at the dramatic turning point when she is left behind by Theseus on the island Naxos. The relevant passage starts with a detailed description of Ariadne's outer appearance. She is first compared to the marble statue (*effigies*) of a female bacchant.³ Ariadne's 'statuesque' appearance then forms the starting point for the imagination of both ancient and modern readers. Throughout the description, Catullus plays with the idea of concealment and revelation. Ariadne is not naked,⁴ but her body can be imagined very clearly. She is wearing a robe, but our attention is drawn to what parts the robe reveals and what articles of clothing she is *not* wearing. In a sense, Catullus undresses her without removing the rest of her clothing:⁵

Cat. c. 64.60–70

*quem procul ex alga maestis Minois ocellis
saxea ut effigies bacchantis prospicit, eheu,
prospicit et magnis curarum fluctuat undis,*

¹ For a recent overview of research, see Lustrum (2015) 282–298 (Skinner); commentaries: Kroll (1922); Fordyce (1961); Godwin (1985); Syndikus (1990).

² Cat. c. 64.48–49, 50–51: *haec vestis priscis hominum variata figuris || heroum mira virtutes indicat arte* [the cloth was decorated with figures of ancient men and showed the virtuous deeds of heroes with extraordinary art].

³ On comparisons with statues, cf. Syndikus (1990) 141 n. 168.

⁴ Syndikus (1990) 142 n. 169.

⁵ G. Huber, *Lebensschilderung und Kleinmalerei im hellenistischen Epos*, Diss. Basel 1926, 62; Syndikus (1990) 141–144; Godwin (1985) ad loc.: “Ariadne's loss of her clothes is partly ironically futile sexual signaling love, partly unconscious sexual signaling to a new lover whom she cannot see (Bacchus), partly an expression of her grief that she does not care about looking 'decent.'”

*non flavo retinens subtilem vertice mitram,
 non contexta levi velatum pectus amictu,
 non tereti strophio lactentis vincta papillas,
 omnia quae toto delapsa e corpore passim
 ipsius ante pedes fluctus salis alludebant.
 sed neque tum mitrae neque tum fluitantis amictus
 illa vicem curans toto ex te pectore, Theseu,
 toto animo, tota pendebat perdita mente.*

Ariadne watches him (sc. Theseus) from afar from the beach covered with sea-weeds with a sad look, like the marble statue of a female bacchant; alas, she watches him and is tossed around by great waves of sorrows. She does not keep the fine *mitra* on her blonde head; she does not have her chest covered with a light cloak; she does not have her milk-white breasts girded with a twisted *strophium*. All these garments had slipped down from her whole body and the tides of the sea played with them at Ariadne's feet. But at that time, she did not care for what her *mitra*, nor for what her floating shawl were doing. With all her heart, Theseus, with all her soul, with all her mind, she hung on thee.

The poet directs our view towards the open chest (*pectus*) and the milk-white breasts (*papillae*), thereby stressing Ariadne's nudity. However, we should by no means misapprehend this to mean that Ariadne is completely naked—that would spoil the effect. Catullus is not writing pornography. Ariadne is no hetaera, but a heroic woman. Comparing her to a female Bacchant, Catullus leaves no doubt that Ariadne is still largely dressed. Female Bacchants are usually not depicted as naked, but as wearing a robe. Ariadne has only lost her shawl. Her *tunica* is ungirded and has somewhat slipped. The fact that the reader still gets the sense of a naked woman shows the erotic effect of saying what she is *not* wearing while leaving what she is wearing only implied.

But let us first have a look at all of Ariadne's garments. Catullus refers to the following four elements of female dress from top to bottom: (1) a headscarf (*mitra*) as headgear (B 13), (2) a light overgarment (*amictus*), i.e. a piece of cloth or shawl called *palliolum* in prose (B 17), (3) a female *tunica* (B 1), and (4) a *strophium* (B 21). Catullus does not mention any shoes. For a heroine, shoes are too prosaic.

At the moment we see her, Ariadne is wearing only her *tunica* of Greek type (*chiton*),⁶ while she has lost the rest of her clothes. By naming the three pieces of clothing that Ariadne is not wearing,⁷ Catullus creates—in a kind of *praeteritio*—the image of a 'regularly dressed' young Greek woman. The contrast intensifies the impression of Ariadne's corporeal beauty. This is what the poet wants his readers to focus on.

⁶ Cf. also the slightly different version of Ovid. epist. 10.137–138 (Ariadne): *adspice demissos lugentis more capillos || et tunicas lacrimis sicut ab imbre graves!* [Look, how my hairs hang down like that of a mourning woman in wail and how my *tunicae* [pl.] are heavy as if from rain].

⁷ For a similar poetic device, cf. Lucan. 2.350–391 (the unusual wedding dress of Marcia), D 5 p. 652.

A (normal) young woman wears a headscarf (*mitra*) on her head to cover her hair, while Ariadne is showing her heroic-blond (*flavus*) hair. She also has a *palliolum* (shawl) thrown around the shoulders and thus covers her torso (*pectus*)—Catullus uses the term *velare* for this, which describes the process of draping the *amictus* around the body in an appropriate way, but also evokes the idea of veiling and unveiling. In contrast, Ariadne has lost her overgarment and allows her chest to be seen. She also lacks a cord (*strophium*) (B 21).⁸ This is not a *fascia pectoralis* (B 22) that was worn like a brassiere on the skin. It might seem so at first glance because of Catullus' mention of Ariadne's breasts (*lactentes papillae*), but this is misleading. Catullus qualifies the *strophium* by the adjective *teres* (twisted),⁹ hinting at the Greek etymology of the word (στρέφω = to twist, plait). A *strophium* fixes the *tunica* to the body. It serves as a belt and thus tightens the cloth.

Ariadne's belt is missing. The garment has therefore slipped down a bit from its usual position, thereby giving free view of Ariadne's chest. The readers' attention is directed to her breasts, thus producing the kind of eroticism typical for this kind of Hellenistic literature. It is probably for this reason that Catullus does not mention Ariadne's *tunica* here, but only brings it up about seventy verses later. Even there, it serves to reveal rather than to dress her body. Ariadne finally lifts her long *tunica* as she walks into the sea, emphasizing what the garment reveals rather than what it covers:

Cat. c. 64.128–130

*tum tremuli salis adversas procurrere in undas
mollia nudatae tollentem tegmina surae (sc. perhibent)*

now she was running, as they say, into the waves of the trembling sea, lifting the soft garment that covered her naked calves.

Catullus follows a Greek example in his description. The gathering of the garment is a literary motif common in Hellenistic poetry¹⁰ and often used in *epyllia*.¹¹ Women

⁸ Against Kroll (1922) and Godwin (1985) ad loc.: “the *strophium* (also known as *mamillare*) is a band tied around the body with a twist between the breast”; Stafford (2005) 106.

⁹ Against Kroll (1922) ad loc.: “Das *strophium* ... wird rund um den Körper gelegt und heißt darum *teres*.”

¹⁰ Kroll (1922) ad loc.: “Das Aufheben des Gewandes ist ein kokettes, für den Epyllienstil passendes Motiv”; Huber (n. 5) 57–61.

¹¹ Apoll. Rhod. 3.874–875 (servants of Medea): ἄν δὲ χιτῶνας || λεπταλέους λευκῆς ἐπιγούνιδος ἄχρῃς ἄειρον [they lifted their fine tunics up until over their knees]; 4.43–46 (Medea): γυμνοῖσιν δὲ πόδεσσιν ἄνὰ στεῖνὰς θέεν οἴμους, || λαιῇ μὲν χερὶ πέπλον ἐπ’ ὀφρύσιν ἀμφὶ μέτωπα || στεῖλαμένη καὶ καλὰ παρήια, δεξιτερῇ δὲ || ἄκρην ὑψόθι πέζαν ἀερτάζουσα χιτῶνος [with bare feet she ran over the narrow paths, with her left hand pulling her peplos above her eyebrows to cover the forehead and the beautiful cheeks, but with her right hand lifting up the outermost border of the tunic] with Livrea (1973) ad loc.; 4.940: αὐτὶς ἄνασχόμεναι λευκοῖς ἐπὶ γούνασι πέζας [lifting up the border over their white knees]; 4.949; Call. hym. Dian. 11–12 (Diana): εἰς γόνυ μέχρι χιτῶα ζώννυσθαι [to gird the *chiton* up to the

lift their long robe when walking quickly (called either χιτών or, in poetry, πέπλος by our sources). This should be imagined in the same way as later European dresses that needed to be lifted up in order to walk quickly or to climb stairs so as to not step on the hem. In its normal state, the border of the *tunica* is lifted a bit from the ground because it is fastened by a cord, the bosom part of it (κόλπος) being doubled. With Ariadne's tunic, it is different. The text has already mentioned that Ariadne has lost her belt (*strophium*). Her *chiton* therefore hangs down and has to be gathered by hand. This act gives Catullus the opportunity to direct the readers' view to another part of Ariadne's body: her naked calves (*nudatae surae*).¹² Again, he plays with the idea of veiling and unveiling. Ariadne's clothes are referred to with the unspecific word *tegmen* (cover), which is derived from *tegere* (to cover). We do not get the impression of a specific garment, but only have the notion of its functioning as some kind of cover. The repeated uncovering that occurs during her movement therefore becomes even more prominent. Ariadne is dressed, but we feel that she is somehow naked. It is the erotic nature of the deserted woman.

knees]; Theocrit. id. 14.35: ἀνειρύσσα δὲ πέπλως [lifting her garments]; 26.16–17: πέπλως ἐκ ζωστήρος ἐς ἰγνύαν εἰρύσσαι [lifting up their garments up to the knees]; Moschus Eur. 126–127: χειρὶ δ' ἄλλῃ εἶρνε πορφύρεας κόλπου (πέπλου Bühler [1960]) πτύχας [with the other hand she (sc. Europa) lifted up the purple folds of her garment] with Bühler (1960) ad loc. The lifting up of the garment is already found in the Homeric hymn to Ceres, cf. Hym. Cer. 176: ὥς αἱ ἐπισχόμεναι ἐανῶν πτύχας ἱμεροέντων [thus they lifted up the folds of their fine garments].

¹² In our Greek sources, the knees are usually mentioned, see n. 11.