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Silent Witnesses and Implausible Judgements: Echoes of Direct Speech in Catullus' Song of the Parcae (Catull. 64)

Abstract: This essay revisits the reception of the speech Achilles addresses to his mother in *Iliad* 18, where he decides to return to the battle, in Catullus 64. It shows that the prophetic part of the song of the Parcae (64.338–371) expands on one line, namely *Iliad* 18.125, which can be interpreted as a parenthesis. While parenthesis is typical of spoken language, Catullus' response consistently diverts the direct speech of its sources into the silent testimony of gestures, of a devastated landscape, of a dead body. At the same time, it marks a semantic shift from knowing a fact to proclaiming a value judgement. These changes serve to problematize the foundations of the warrior's renown, laying bare the intimate bond between others' grief and the warrior's *kleos*. In identifying this bond as a phenomenon of reception, the song invites the reader to examine his or her own reception of it.

Keywords: Catullus 64, *Iliad* 18, *kleos*, hero, *virtus*, song of the Parcae, Achilles, Polyxena

1 Introduction: the parenthetical structure of Catullus 64

Catullus' epyllion on the wedding of Peleus and Thetis seems an appropriate object of study for the topic of this volume. The whole poem, "a web and a labyrinth" in the words of Julia Gaisser,¹ can be read as an illustration of the concept of the 'parenthesis'. Leaving aside the fact that it starts out by evoking Medea and the departure of the Argo but quickly turns to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, it purports to sing the

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1 Gaisser 1995, 580; cf. Theodorakopoulos 2000; Schmale 2004. Skinner 2015 offers an excellent overview of the rich scholarship on the poem up to that date. On Catull. 64 as an epyllion (a modern designation), see Trimble 2012.

uirtutes of the heroes, who are addressed with hymnic pathos at the beginning of the poem: ‘O heroes, born from an exceedingly desirable era of time, hail, offspring of the gods! O good progeny of mothers, hail again’ (*o nimis optato saeculorum tempore nati / heroes, saluete, deum genus! o bona matrum / progenies, saluete iterum*, 22–23b).² But two long sections notoriously undercut this project, the *ekphrasis* of the wedding coverlet depicting Ariadne abandoned by Theseus, and the wedding song of the Parcae predicting Achilles’ prowess as a warrior. The declared programme clashes with the way the inset parts foreground the suffering caused by Theseus and Achilles. A strong tension or dissonance arises between the narrative frame and these ‘parentheses’; to describe it scholars have often resorted to the notion of irony.³

Neither the *ekphrasis* nor the song of the Parcae are parentheses in a narrow sense, given the sheer length of these inserted sections (217 and 59 lines, respectively). Nevertheless, the notion of parenthesis seems useful in describing the structure of the poem. But the question that needs to be addressed in the context of a volume on ‘parentheses of reception’ is a more specific one, namely that of how the poetic tradition is treated in the *ekphrasis* and in the song of the Parcae. If these sections offer counterpoints to the announced programme, i.e. the praise of the heroes, how exactly does the poem’s parenthetical structure pit conflicting traditions or viewpoints against each other?

As John Hamilton notes in his essay “Heidegger in Klammern”, a parenthesis includes and excludes at the same time.⁴ The same ambiguity characterizes the inset parts of Catullus’ epyllion. They divert attention from the wedding of Peleus and Thetis onto other myths and at the same time pose the question of how the different strands of the narration hold together.⁵ More importantly, the poet of *carmen* 64 includes conflicting perspectives on the heroic age, but he declines authorship for the ‘subversive’ parts of the poem, those that foreground the suffering caused by

² The text follows Mynors 1958. Unless stated otherwise, translations are mine. On the hymnic form of these lines and the literary models, see Magnelli 2018; Fernandelli 2012, 176–177; Schmale 2004, 72–73. Forms of *uirtus* appear in lines 51, 323, 348, 357. On expectations raised and thwarted in the opening section of the poem see, e.g., DeBrohun 2007; on the layers of narrative voices, Trimble 2020.

³ Kinsey 1965; Curran 1969, 175 and 192, n. 31; Bramble 1970, 34; Stoevesandt 1994–1995, 168; Theodorakopoulos 2000, 137–138; Fernandelli 2012, 99 (and see below, n. 000). The limits of this approach, which tends to evacuate meaning, have been described by Fernandelli 2012, XXXIII–XXXIV.

⁴ Hamilton 2020–2021, 21.

⁵ See, e.g., Gaisser 1995; Warden 1998; Schmale 2004, 77–78; Fernandelli 2012, XV–XXXIV; Young 2015, 32–33; Harrison 2019, 782–784; Trimble 2020. Approaching Catull. 64 from what is left out, Ambühl 2014, 118–123 discusses the reverse of parenthesis, ellipsis; Theodorakopoulos 2000, 118–121 remarks on the tension between disorder and enclosure within the *ekphrasis*. Recent studies focus especially on the complex temporalities of the poem: Wasdin 2017; Sider 2020; Lax 2020; Schierl 2023.

the heroes and thus complicate their praise. By inserting an *ekphrasis* of a figurative artifact and by reporting a song, the poet defers authority to the maker of the art work and to the singers of the song, the Parcae.⁶

In the limited space of this essay, the focus will be on the song of the Parcae, which has often been described as the most complex part of Catullus' intricate miniature epic.⁷ More precisely, in the first part I will examine two words in particular that belong to the prophetic middle part of the song, namely *fatebuntur* (line 349) and *testis* (lines 357 and 362). Careful scrutiny of the way Catullus responds to the poetic tradition in these metapoetical passages suggests that he does not just refuse authorship for the gruesome tales about Achilles that occupy this part of the song. He goes farther by problematizing the authenticating strategies that the Parcae adopt in their song. The goddesses adduce impossible witnesses for Achilles' *uirtutes*, namely the absent, the mute, and the dead. More importantly, their song consistently eliminates the direct speech of its sources and alters the evaluations of Achilles' deeds found there. The silencing of the witnesses and the tampering with their judgements draws attention not only to the discrepancy between heroic deeds and the suffering they cause but, more broadly, to the gap between mere facts and their evaluation.⁸ In the second part, I will argue that the line in Homer's *Iliad* (18.125) that provides the model for Catullus' *fatebuntur* (64.349) is a parenthesis, whose elliptical and ethically questionable thought is both spelled out and exposed in the song of the Parcae.

2 Achilles' 'splendid achievements' (Catull. 64.348)

The song of the Parcae, which occupies lines 323–381 of the poem, is emphatically introduced as truthful. The narrator announces that 'the Parcae began their truthful song' (*ueridicos Parcae coeperunt edere cantus*, 306), and that 'such a destiny they disclosed with their divine song, which no later generation could accuse of perfidy' (*taliam diuino fuderunt carmine fata, / carmine, perfidiae quod post nulla*

6 This deferral of authority, which in a different way can be observed already in lines 1–2 (*pinus / dicuntur*; see DeBrohun 2007, 296–297), is of course incomplete, as the well-known problem of how the author of the *ekphrasis* is supposed to 'see' what the characters who are depicted in an artwork say (Schröder 2007, 45; cf. Trimble 2020, 123–124).

7 On its structure mirroring that of the whole poem, see Schmale 2004, 221–222.

8 This resonates with other parts of the poem, notably the figure of Theseus, who is introduced to illustrate *heroum ... uirtutes* (51) but causes Ariadne's pain (see, e.g., Gaisser 1995, 591–608; Knopp 1976, and below, n. 11).

arguet aetas, 321–322); the same point is also made within the song, which refers to itself as a ‘truthful oracle’ (*ueridicum oraculum*, 326).⁹ Of course this song *has* to be true, because the goddesses of Fate make what they sing: they do not just impart knowledge about Achilles’ future life, they also produce the threads that correspond to his lifespan.¹⁰ The claim to the trustworthiness of this song responds directly to the version of the myth which credits Apollo with a wedding song predicting a long life for Achilles – the very god, in other words, who would eventually kill the young hero and thus belie his own words: unlike the Parcae, Apollo did *not* actualize what he sang. His song at Peleus and Thetis’ wedding and his role in Achilles’ death are alluded to by Hera, who chides the god’s perfidy at *Iliad* 24.62–63: ‘you dined among them, holding your lyre, companion of the wicked, always faithless!’ (ἐν δὲ σὺ τοῖσιν / δαίνυ’ ἔχων φόρμιγγα, κακῶν ἑταρ’, αἰὲν ἄπιστε), the wicked ally being Paris. Plato quotes a passage from Aeschylus’ lost play *Hoplōn krisis* (fr. 284 Mette = 350 Nauck² / Radt), where Thetis herself accuses Apollo of treachery. After recalling the god’s auspicious prophecy concerning her progeny, she states (*Rep.* 2, 383b):

ὁ δ’; αὐτὸς ὕμνων, αὐτὸς ἐν θοίνῃ παρών,
αὐτὸς τάδ’ εἰπών, αὐτὸς ἐστὶν ὁ κτανὼν
τὸν παῖδα τὸν ἐμόν.

And he, himself singing, himself present at the feast,
himself saying these things, he himself is the one who killed
my child.

The fourfold anaphora of αὐτός emphasizes the scandal of the god who did the opposite of what he himself had announced.¹¹ In Catullus’ wedding of Peleus and Thetis, Apollo and Diana are not among the guests (299–302), and a “truthful” song is sung by the Parcae.¹²

⁹ Bramble 1970, 28 notes that if “the prophecy is about to contain a surprise [...] then the insistence gains point”. The rejection of *perfidia* (322) can be read as an allusion to Apollo’s song (*Iliad* 24.62–63) (Nuzzo 2003, 159). Fernandelli 2019, 139 rightly points out that the middle part of the song does not express good wishes (as would be expected of a wedding song), but a prophecy.

¹⁰ Fernandelli 2012, 291–292; Trimble 2013, 273.

¹¹ Cf. Fernandelli 2019, 34–38 (quoting, among else, Kavafis’ poem “Apistia” which is dedicated to Thetis’ accusation of Apollo); Fernandelli 2012, 105–106; Schmale 2004, 222–223. Unfaithfulness and unreliability are *leitmotifs* in *Carmen* 64, notably in the myth of Theseus and Ariadne; this might explain why the perjury of Pelops, Achilles’ ancestor, is mentioned in line 346. I would like to thank Michalis Chrysanthopoulos for drawing my attention to Kavafis’ “Apistia”.

¹² Regarding the god’s absence, we may suppose that Catullus was familiar with the reproach of *apistia* against his song (Fernandelli 2012, 282–283). At the same time, if both Apollo and Diana are

However, if the song mirrors the structure of the poem as a whole, a poem which is characterized by strong tensions between different perspectives on the heroic age and by narrative dead ends, the emphasis on its truthfulness mutates into a warning against the untrustworthiness of the epyllion. Such a reading is suggested by the very opening of the poem, where we are led to expect a narrative about the Argonauts before we realize that the subject is the union of Peleus and Thetis, only to be side-tracked again by the myth of Theseus and Ariadne.¹³ The wedding song itself contributes to the frustration of reader expectations by dwelling on violence and suffering on what is supposed to be a happy occasion. But it is crucial to realize that the poem, and in particular the song of the Parcae, does more than just play with the reader, for it poses the question of how we are supposed to understand and make sense of the myths that the literary tradition hands down, and above all how we are to evaluate them. In other words, it encourages an engaged reading.

The remarkable emphasis on the truthfulness of the Parcae's song makes us all the more alert to the witnesses that are adduced to testify to Achilles' great deeds, or *uirtutes* (348, 357).¹⁴ The witnesses are the mothers of the warriors slain by Achilles, the Scamander which is heaped with corpses, and Polyxena who is slaughtered on Achilles' tomb. As many readers have noted, these witnesses make us resist the positive evaluation of Achilles' deeds that is embedded in the song itself (348–351).¹⁵

illius egregias uirtutes claraque facta
saepe fatebuntur gnatorum in funere matres,
cum incultum cano soluent a uertice crinem,
putridaque infirmis uariabunt pectora palmis.

His splendid achievements and illustrious deeds
will mothers often avow at the burial of their sons,
when they loosen dishevelled hair from their hoary heads
and hit their withered breasts with frail hands.

absent, as Nuzzo 2003, 152 notes, the reason seems to be that they reject the union of a goddess with a mortal (Fernandelli 2012, 285–288).

¹³ See above, n. 3. Schröder 2007, 40, therefore sees in *perfidia* a “zentrales erzähltechnisches Prinzip” (see also below n. 17 and p. 59). On the multiple meanings of even just the first word (*Peliaco*), see, e.g., Stoevesandt 1994–1995, 192–198.

¹⁴ Gaisser 1995, 610. The reading proposed here differs from Theodorakopoulos, who sees in the insistence on the song's veracity “an expression of closure and authority” (2000, 136), and from Schröder, who writes (2007, 42) that Catullus “schafft einen Erzähler, der selbst nicht zuverlässig ist, *der aber Figuren seiner Erzählung zuverlässig erzählen lassen kann*” (my italics). I will show below in what way I think that this is not the case for the Parcae.

¹⁵ E.g., Bramble 1970, 26: “Blood and slaughter are the keynotes, not heroism or virtue”.

The adjectives of line 348, *egregias* and *clara*, have undeniable positive connotations, but the tableau of the grieving mothers violently clashes with the idea of noble deeds.¹⁶ While the mothers may in fact acknowledge that Achilles killed their sons (as we gather from the following lines, introduced with *namque* in 353), it is inconceivable that they would praise him for this deed. There is a discrepancy between the mere facts and their positive evaluation in line 348: the mothers may testify to the former, but hardly to the latter.¹⁷ The question that arises is that of whose perspective the attributes *egregias* and *clara* reflect.

The verb that is used of the mothers, *fatebuntur* (349), encapsulates this entire complexity, and a glance at Catullus' source shows that this is hardly a coincidence. As Magdalene Stoevesandt has shown in detail, the model for the shocking scene of the grieving mothers is found in the speech which Achilles addresses to his own mother, after he learned that Patroclus is dead, at the beginning of Book 18 of the *Iliad*.¹⁸ This speech surfaces already in line 343, 'to him (sc. Achilles), no hero will compare himself in war' (*non illi quisquam bello se conferet heros*), which recalls Achilles' own words in *Iliad* 18.105–106: 'I who am such as is no other of the bronze-clad Achaeans in war' (τοῖος ἔὼν οἷός οὔ τις Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτῶνων / ἐν πολέμῳ). In this speech, Achilles compares himself to Herakles, who died even though he was the son of a god, and evokes his own imminent death before concluding with the following lines, which are most relevant for our passage (*Iliad* 18.120–126):

ὥς καὶ ἐγὼν, εἰ δὴ μοι ὁμοίῃ μοῖρα τέτυκται,	120
κεῖσσι μ' ἐπεὶ κε θάνω· νῦν δὲ κλέος ἔσθλόν ἀροίμην,	
καὶ τίνα Τρωϊάδων καὶ Δαρδανίδων βαθυκόλπων	
ἀμφοτέρησιν χερσὶ παρειᾶν ἀπαλάων	
δάκρυ' ὁμορξαμένην ἀδινὰ στοναχῆσαι ἐφείην,	
γνοῖεν δ' ὥς δὴ δηρὸν ἐγὼ πολέμοιο πέπαυμαι.	125
μηδέ μ' ἔρυκε μάχης φιλέουσά περ· οὐδέ με πείσεις.	

¹⁶ Catull. 64 has been described as "a gallery of tableaux or set-pieces" (Jenkyns 1982, 150; cf. Quinn 1970, 289–299); this is especially true of the song of the Parcae. See also below, Section 3.

¹⁷ In Gaisser's words (1995, 612): "The witnesses attest to the deeds prophesied by the Parcae but pronounce them horrible." Stoevesandt 1994/1995, 186–187; Fernandelli 2012, 98–114; Fernandelli 2019. Already Klingner 1956, 25 wrote that "so bleibt doch der Begriff *virtutes* selbst [...] leer und ohne Anschauung"; for earlier assessments along these lines, see Stoevesandt 1994/1995, 170 n. 14. Lefèvre 2000, 75 misses the point when he writes, "daß ferner von Achilles' *egregiae virtutes* (348) die Rede ist, stört (scil. die Kritiker) nicht", since this is precisely what does bother those readers, while he himself fails to note the tension between the positive evaluation and those to whom it is attributed. Stoevesandt 1994–1995, 198–204 argues that in reworking the Homeric material, Catullus is influenced by Hesiod's more critical view of war.

¹⁸ The parallel was already noticed by Perrotta 1931, 99; see also Kroll ⁵1968, 189.

So also shall I, if a like fate has been fashioned for me, lie when I am dead. But now let me win glorious renown and set many a one among the deep-bosomed Trojan and Dardanian women to wipe the tears from her tender cheeks with both hands, and to moan ceaselessly – may they then realize that long have I kept apart from the war. And seek not to hold me back from battle, though you love me; you will not persuade me. (Transl. Murray 1999, mod.)

The parallels with the song of the Parcae are obvious, not just in terms of content but also of form, for this final portion of Achilles' speech is prophetic, and it is intriguing that he refers to his own death with the word μοῖρα 'fate', considering how the song of the Parcae, the Roman counterparts of the Greek Moirai, rushes towards the hero's death.¹⁹ In the light of this passage it becomes clear that the positive attributes in Catullus 64.348 represent most of all Achilles' own perspective: it is his evaluation, encapsulated in the heroic ideal of 'glorious renown' (κλέος ἐσθλόν, 18.121), that the song of the Parcae adopts and, implausibly, attributes to the mothers.²⁰

What is lost, however, in the extremely selective references to this speech in the song of the Parcae is the precise context that motivates Achilles' cruel wish to make the women of the enemy camp grieve, namely the fact that his own mother, too, will soon lose a son – himself (*Iliad* 18.86–90):

αἶθ' ὄφελες σὺ μὲν αὖθι μετ' ἀθανάτης ἀλῆσιν
ναίειν, Πηλεὺς δὲ θνητὴν ἀγαγέσθαι ἄκοιτιν·
νῦν δ' ἵνα καὶ σοὶ πένθος ἐνὶ φρεσὶ μυρίον εἴη
παιδὸς ἀποφθιμένοιο, τὸν οὐχ ὑποδέξειαι αὖτις
οἶκαδε νοστήσαντ' (κτλ)

I wish you had remained where you were among the immortal maidens of the sea, and that Peleus had taken to his home a mortal bride. But now – it was so that you too might have measureless grief at heart for your dead son, whom you will never again welcome back to his home. (Transl. Murray 1999)

Incidentally, the motif of Thetis' grief for her son may also be the reason why Catullus makes the women of Achilles' speech – perhaps young wives and sisters – into mothers.²¹ At the same time, by isolating the tableau of the grieving mothers from its original context, where Achilles anticipates his own mother's pain, the song

¹⁹ See below, p. 60. Coray 2018, 62 notes that in *Il.* 18.119 and 120 μοῖρα means 'fate of death'.

²⁰ Schmale 2004, 242 remarks that the change of speaker (from Achilles to the mothers) entails a change of perspective which allows the reader to empathize with the victims.

²¹ I see this as a more immediate reason than the model of Euripides' Hecabe, cited by Schmale 2004, 242 ("die um ihre zahlreichen vor Troia gefallenen Kinder trauernde alte Mutter par excellence").

of the Parcae foregrounds its cruelty in stark terms.²² Even more surprising is the verb *fatebuntur*, with the mothers as its subject. It evidently responds to γνοῖεν (line 125) and can be translated as ‘they will recognize’. But while the Homeric γνοῖεν, ‘may they realize’, anticipates this meaning and is clearly a model, Catullus’ *fatebuntur* goes much farther. γνοῖεν merely designates a mental act, whereas *fatebuntur* is closer to ‘they will recognize and publicly acknowledge’ (namely, with their gestures of mourning).²³ The more assertive character of the Latin verb is further emphasized by the passage from the Greek optative to the future tense. The article *fateor* in the *ThLL* includes a subchapter for the meaning *prae se ferre, non celare, prodere, declarare*, and the first passage quoted is ours (*ThLL* s.v. *fateor* II, col. 341, 72–73). But in addition, *fateri* contains of course a reference to speaking; in fact, this is the first meaning of this verb, which is derived from *fari* (*ThLL* s.v. *fateor*, col. 335, 50). In the metapoetic atmosphere of this song, this cannot go unnoticed. *fatebuntur* resonates with the adjective *ueridicus* (306 and 326) and also with *ne-fando* and *fanda nefanda* at the end of the poem (397 and 405).²⁴ The oblique reference to speaking is all the more interesting as the word *fatebuntur* is basically taken from Achilles’ speech but is no longer spoken by Achilles, whose voice is suppressed. It is instead spoken by the Parcae, but ironically it serves to deflect attention away from their utterance and to suggest rather slyly that instead the mothers themselves speak, even though they do not do so with words, but with gestures of grief. So, whereas in the *Iliad* Achilles speaks, the act of speaking is now projected onto the mothers, and so is Achilles’ positive evaluation of his deeds.

Julia Gaisser writes of the mothers, the Scamander, and Polyxena that the three witnesses “speak (they are witnesses after all)”.²⁵ While the mothers do not speak literally (nor do the other witnesses, for that matter), the verb *fatebuntur* certainly suggests that they do, in addition to raising the question as to what exactly it is that they declare. By leaving us in doubt about these questions precisely where a testimony is adduced, the tableau of the grieving mothers achieves more than just creating grim irony between heroic deeds and the suffering they cause, or between the perspective of the conqueror and that of the victims. Rather, it subverts the whole idea of giving testimony. In other words, the interest of the passage does not just lie in the tension between the concept of *uirtutes* and human suffering, but in the way

²² Stoevesandt 1994/1995, 181 writes that unlike in Homer, Achilles’ excess is not contingent on the situation, but appears to define his character.

²³ Nuzzo 2003, 167 translates ‘attesteranno’.

²⁴ Line 397 marks the transition from the heroic age to the present world, which abounds with the worst crimes and has therefore been abandoned by the gods. See Fernandelli 2012, 312–328.

²⁵ Gaisser 1995, 612.

the act of giving testimony itself is called into question. Are the mothers speaking? If so, how, and what exactly do they say? Anyway, how would they know who killed their sons and in what way? They were not there to see.

This is different for the river Scamander, the second witness invoked by the Parcae and the scene of some of Achilles' cruelest killings. However, it is interesting to note that if Achilles' voice is suppressed in the song of the Parcae, so is Scamander's. In *Iliad* 21, the Scamander is a river god who addresses Achilles in the following way' (21.214–221):

ὦ Ἀχιλεῦ, περὶ μὲν κρατέεις, περὶ δ' αἴσυλα ῥέζεις
 ἀνδρῶν· αἰεὶ γάρ τοι ἀμύνουσιν θεοὶ αὐτοί.
 εἴ τοι Τρῳάς ἔδωκε Κρόνου παῖς πάντα ὀλέσσαι,
 ἐξ ἐμέθεν γ' ἐλάσας πεδίον κάτω μέρμερα ῥέζε·
 πλήθει γὰρ δὴ μοι νεκύων ἐρατεινὰ ῥέεθρα,
 οὐδέ τί πη δύναμαι προχέειν ῥόον εἰς ἄλα δῖαν
 στεινόμενος νεκύεσσι· σὺ δὲ κτείνεις αἰδήλως.
 ἀλλ' ἄγε δὴ καὶ ἕασον· ἄγη μ' ἔχει, ὄρχαμε λαῶν.

Achilles, beyond men are you in might, and beyond men you do deeds of evil; for ever do the gods themselves protect you. If the son of Cronos has granted you to slay all the men of Troy, at least drive them out of my stream, and do your grim work on the plain. For full are my lovely streams with the dead, nor can I in any way pour my waters out into the bright sea, being choked with the dead, while you ever slay ruthlessly. But come now, leave off; amazement holds me, leader of men. (Transl. Murray 1999)

If the tableau of the grieving mothers refers us to the Achilles of *Iliad* 18–24, where Achilles returns to the battle to avenge Patroclus, the link with this particular phase of Achilles' life as a warrior is now confirmed. We are confronted with a hero whose thirst for revenge turns into brutal excess.²⁶ As Brooke Holmes notes, in ancient art rivers are often portrayed as bulls; by contrast, in *Iliad* 21 Scamander 'made himself like a man' (line 213). However, the fact that Scamander speaks is the only explicit anthropomorphizing trait of the river god.²⁷ The song of the Parcae in turn deprives him of precisely this trait. Here, the Scamander is no longer a god but just a river, whose plight is described in the third person. This river has no voice of its own (357–360):

²⁶ Schmale 2004, 241; Stoevesandt 1994/1995, 181 and 203. Klingner 1956, 24 writes: "Neu aber ist, dass diese Erhöhung (sc. Achills) mehr und mehr von ihrer schrecklichen Seite aus angeschaut wird", and he draws a line to Euripides.

²⁷ Holmes 2015, 32: "He can 'make himself like a man' (ἀνέρι εισάμενος, *Il.* 21.213) in order to speak to Achilles (the voice rises from the eddies, indicating that Scamander's anthropomorphism is limited to his speech)." For a discussion of Scamander's anger, see van Emde Boas 2022, 70–74.

testis erit magnis uirtutibus unda Scamandri,
 quae passim rapido diffunditur Hellesponto,
 cuius iter caesis angustans corporum acervis
 alta tepefaciet permixta flumina caede.

Witness of his great achievements will be the wave of Scamander which pours itself forth abroad in the current of Hellespont, whose channel he shall choke with heaps of slain corpses, and make the deep streams warm with mingled blood. (Transl. Cornish 2017, mod.)

In Latin literature, mute objects as witnesses are not unusual. In a discussion of tropes, Cicero quotes the words, probably from Ennius' *Scipio*, 'witnesses are the Great Plains' (*testes sunt Campi Magni*, *De oratore* 3.167);²⁸ later, Horace, Tibullus and Propertius adduce rivers as witnesses, perhaps following the model of Catullus.²⁹ But those knowing the corresponding scene in the *Iliad* will recall that Scamander speaks and, in fact, pronounces a judgement over Achilles, a negative one at that: the anaphora of *περί* (line 214) beautifully encapsulates the excess that has struck many readers of the last six books of the *Iliad*.³⁰ What is more, by introducing the series of three witnesses by a verb associated with speaking where the corresponding scene in the *Iliad* does not have one (namely *fatebuntur*, 349), the passage may evoke uses of *testis* that involve speaking. To complicate things further, *testis* can of course also refer to an author or a literary source (*OLD* s.v. *testis* 3),³¹ and this meaning is certainly not far when a precise moment of the *Iliad* is alluded to, as is the case here. The polysemy of *testis* – silent witness, one speaking as a witness, and a written source – enriches the passage with different nuances. But more strident is the fact that Scamander, no longer an angry god but just a natural element, falls

28 Ennius, *Scipio* 8 Vahlen = F 2 Goldberg/Manuwald (*Fragmentary Republican Latin II*, 2018, 286). The reference is to the Great Plains which saw Scipio's battle against Hasdrubal and Syphax in 203.

29 Horace, c. 4.4.38; Tibullus 1.7.9–12.

30 For overviews of the reception of Achilles, see Effe 1988; Latacz 1995. As Theodorakopoulos 2000, 138 points out, the word *uirtus* appears only one more time in Catullus' oeuvre, interestingly in a passage that seems to belie the positive evaluation of heroic deeds attributed in Catull. 64 to Scamander: *Troia (nefas!) commune sepulcrum Asiaeque Europaeque, / Troia uirum et uirtutum omnium acerba cinis* (68.89–90).

31 According to the *OLD*, a *testis* is (1) 'One present at a legal transaction to give the proceedings validity', (2) 'One who gives evidence in court, a witness', (3) 'One who solemnly affirms or testifies to a fact', b) '(rhet. applied to a scene of action, inanim. obj., etc., invoked as cognizant of a fact)', c) '(applied to a writer)', (4) '(w. gen., usu. applied to things) That which (one who) constitutes evidence of a fact, a proof, indicator', (5) 'One who is present as observer of an event, etc., a witness. b (applied to places, inanim. objs.)'.

silent. He no longer speaks for himself but is instead enlisted to confirm a positive evaluation of Achilles' deeds, which blatantly contradicts his role in the *Iliad*.³²

Compared to the twofold praise of line 348, the object of the witnessing is now significantly toned down: 'great deeds' (*magnis uirtutibus*, 357). *magnus* is more ambivalent than *egregius* or *clarus* and possibly allows for a darker interpretation, in line with Scamander's judgement in the *Iliad*.³³ But the echo of *uirtutes* in 348 and the positive attributes of that line interfere with such a reading, and the implied praise is dissonant not only with the horrible image of the river banked up with corpses, but also with the vocally censorious Scamander of the *Iliad*.

The third witness is silent for different reasons. Silenced already in the poetic tradition, which for us is represented mainly by a few fragments of the *Troiae Halosis* and by Euripides' *Hecuba*, the dead body of Polyxena is not so much a witness to but evidence of Achilles' insatiable lust to kill, which brings destruction even after his own death. But to translate *testis* in line 362 as 'evidence' or 'proof' (*OLD* s.v. *testis* 4) would mean to elide the complexity of the word, which oscillates first of all between 'one present to something' and 'one giving evidence of something' (*OLD* s.v. *testis* 1–2).³⁴ However, while the river Scamander is present in the sense that it is the theatre of the battle between Achilles and the Trojans, it is hard to imagine a corpse as being "present to something" (362–370):

denique testis erit morti quoque reddita praeda,
cum teres excelso coaceruatum aggere bustum
excipiet niueos perculsae uirginis artus.
currite ducentes subtegmina, currite, fusi.
nam simul ac fessis dederit fors copiam Achiuis
urbis Dardaniae Neptunia soluere uincla,
alta Polyxenia madefient caede sepulcra;
quae, uelut ancipiti succumbens uictima ferro,
proiciet truncum summisso poplite corpus.

Lastly, witness too shall be the prize assigned to him in death, when the rounded barrow heaped up with lofty mound shall receive the snowy limbs of the slaughtered maiden. Run, drawing the woof-threads, ye spindles, run. For so soon as Fortune shall give to the weary Achaeans power to loosen the Neptune-forged circlet of the Dardanian town, the high tomb shall be wetted with Polyxena's blood, who like a victim falling under the two-edged steel, shall bend her knee and throw her headless trunk forward. (Transl. Cornish 2017, mod.)

³² Readers of the *Iliad* will recall Scamander's emotionality, an aspect discussed by Holmes 2015, who underlines that anger and care motivate his reaction to Achilles.

³³ *OLD* s.v. *magnus*, (15) 'proud, boastful'. But by all accounts the positive connotations of *uirtutes* remain in place.

³⁴ See above n. 31.

What exactly does Polyxena's dead body witness, how does it give evidence, and of what? The difficulty of the counterintuitive *testis* is compounded by the fact that the object of the witnessing is now omitted. The repetition of the word *testis* does the work on its own, implying that the object is Achilles' 'great deeds'. However, bearing in mind that in line 357 *testis* is accompanied by a dative (*magnis uirtutibus*), it is hard not to be struck by the words *testis morti* in line 362 – 'witness to death' – before realizing that *morti* belongs to *reddita* and refers to the dead Achilles. This powerful ambiguity might in fact motivate the metonymy *morti* (for *mortuo*), in addition to the model of Euripides' words describing Polyxena as a 'gift to the lifeless corpse' (δῶρον ἀψύχῳ νεκρῷ, *Trojan Women* 623).³⁵

Readers of Euripides' *Hecuba* may remember that before Polyxena dies, she delivers a short but impressive speech claiming her right to die as a free person (548–552). The only word in our passage that recalls her courage is *proiciet* (370); however, the preceding line compares her to a sacrificial animal, and all she has left to 'throw forward', after her knees bend like those of a Homeric warrior, is her 'headless trunk'.³⁶ In the speedy denouement of this prophecy, she has no time to speak.

One might argue that the elimination of direct speech in all three episodes is a mere consequence of the drastic reduction in size of these scenes in Catullus' highly learned and allusive poetry. But the consistency of the transformation, which is highlighted and complicated by the word *fatebuntur*, advises against such a banal explanation. In order to make sense of the shift toward silent characters, it is necessary to return once more to the grieving mothers.

3 'and may they realize...' (*Iliad* 18.125)

In its brevity, the song of the Parcae shows rather than narrates. The words *fatebuntur* and *testis* point to the mute force of the images that are put before our eyes, as if in an artwork or a drama. The gestures of the grieving mothers, the river polluted with corpses, and Polyxena slain on Achilles' tomb 'speak' to us without

³⁵ OLD 5a. Fordyce 1961, ad loc. notes as parallels *inania morti / munera dant lacrimas* (Ov. *Met.* 2.340–341) and *ut te postremo donarem munere mortis* (Catull. 101.3). But in our passage the thought is not general and *morti* necessarily refers to Achilles himself, which makes the metonymy more unusual.

³⁶ For the harrowing 'irony' of the scene, see Curran 1969, 189; Quinn 1970, 345; Knopp 1976, 212; Fernandelli 2019, 150–151. The sexual connotations of lines 363–364 and 367 (in addition to their extraordinary cruelty) have often been commented on (see, e.g., Schmale 2004, 246).

words, reified testimonies of sorts.³⁷ In a way, then, the content of the song repeats what the Parcae do when they sing: for as the refrain reminds us, they spin their song as a material object, a thread flowing through their fingers: ‘but you, run drawing the threads which destiny follows, run, spindles’ (*sed uos, quae fata sequuntur, / currite ducentes subtegmina, currite, fusi* (326–327)).³⁸ Although *fata* refers both to the destiny and to the utterance announcing it and thus draws attention to the act of singing, the middle part of the song of the Parcae is strangely silent, and strangely material (the many ties that link it to the bedspread depicting Ariadne and Theseus – another textile artefact – have been commented upon).³⁹ The way it diverts the direct speech of its sources into the silent testimony of gestures, of a ravaged landscape, and of a dead body lying on a tomb minimizes the space for explicit evaluation on the part of the characters. While they hardly share the positive evaluation encapsulated by the word *uirtutes* and its attributes (348 and 357), they do not add an explicit, unambiguous judgement of their own – certainly not a spoken one. If the grieving mothers ‘avowing’ Achilles’ splendid achievements seem to belie this impression, it is precisely here that we find the most conspicuous hint to the tension between knowing a fact and attributing a meaning to it which surfaces in the song of the Parcae.

A careful look suggests that the reticence of the witnesses responds to the final lines of Achilles’ speech at the beginning of *Iliad* 18. We have seen that in Catullus, the vignette of the grieving mothers introduces the whole development on witnessing, and that in this vignette, Catullus transforms a mental act – the verb *γνοῖν* in *Iliad* 18.125 – into something directed outward: *fatebuntur* (349). The difference is between coming to know and acknowledging in public.

If we look at the objects of the Greek and the Latin verbs, there is also a difference. In *Iliad* 18.125, the thought is rather elliptical: Achilles expresses the wish that the women may realize, the moment he comes back to the battlefield, that long has he kept apart from the war: they will know by the many Trojans now killed. Catullus

37 Gaisser 1995, 611 writes: “We shall also hear snippets from the witnesses”, but in fact, we do not; it is above all the ingenious *fatebuntur* of line 349 that suggests that we do. In their own way, the three moments are ‘snapshots’, in the sense this term is used by Sistakou 2009 for Hellenistic epyllion and by Schierl 2023 for the *ekphrasis* of Ariadne in Catull. 64: they are tipping points, not in terms of plot (where they connote closure) but, as we will see, in that they use the visual force of a ‘tableau’ to raise the question of whether what they show is worthy of praise, or not.

38 Line 327 is repeated eleven times. Models of this kind of refrain can be found in Theocritus 1 and 2 (Nuzzo 2003, 161).

39 In the *ekphrasis* of the bedspread, the woven textile ‘speaks’, in the song of the Parcae, the spun thread ‘sings’; both draw attention to the precarious nature of the meanings that material objects and silent images are made to carry. See, e.g. Wasdin 2017, 185–191; Sider 2020, 109.

instead gives us as direct object of *fatebuntur* the following words: *illius egregias uirtutes claraque facta* (line 348), i.e. an evaluation of the many Trojans killed. While Achilles' line is elliptical, the thought remains concrete: many Trojans will be slain. Catullus complicates the picture in two ways: by giving a value to Achilles' exploit, and by implying that the value judgement is shared by the Trojan mothers.

Now, it is interesting to note that γνῶτεν in line 125 is slightly incongruent in terms of syntax. Its subject, a plural, has to be inferred from τίνα in line 122, which is a singular, and the change from two verbs in the first person singular – ἀποίμην in 121 and ἐφείην in 124 – to the third person plural is rather abrupt.⁴⁰ In fact, one could see line 125 as an afterthought, a parenthesis (or *opisthotesis*, as the grammarians called a different thought that is added at the end of a sentence).⁴¹ It intrudes into the dialogue between Achilles and his mother which is dominated by verb forms of the first and second persons, and it adds a mental dimension to the enemy women's gestures of grief evoked in the preceding two lines, more precisely, an insight that concerns Achilles himself and is of utmost importance to him. For as far as his renown is concerned, the women's tears do not matter at all. But their realizing that he is the one who caused them does. The slippage from grief to *kleos* – the greater the enemy's grief, the greater the hero's *kleos* – is not prominent in Achilles' speech. But it is there, and in a very specific form indeed.⁴² It might be worth asking whether the subject of γνῶτεν could even be wider than just the

40 A fact that is slightly obscured by the parallel construction in many translations and commentaries, e.g. Murray 1999: "and now let me win [...]; and let them know". Coray 2018, 65 notes that line 125 is "a wish clause that is supposed to be the result of a preceding wish" (i.e., the one expressed in the preceding optative forms), and cites the parallel of *Iliad* 1.411–412 (also Achilles addressing Thetis). But the change of subject is nevertheless unexpected; moreover, Rutherford 2019, 123 notes that the content, too, is slightly incoherent: "We might expect 'that I have indeed returned to the conflict'". The scholia interpret line 125 as a purpose clause (α. ἵνα γνῶσιν).

41 Lähnemann/Rupp 2003, 574, who note that the parenthesis is discussed by Alexandrian critics in relation to insertions into the Homeric poems, that it follows the syntax of spoken language and that in epic poetry it is most often found in direct speeches; similarly, Classen 1867, 6 writes "dass (die Parenthese) am entschiedensten sich da geltend macht, wo die erregte Gemüthsstimmung des Redenden ihren unmittelbaren Ausdruck erhalten soll". Classen, who notes in his discussion of Homeric parentheses that particles do the work that the syntax does not (1867, 18–19), does not include *Iliad* 1.411–412 or 18.125, but his analysis of, e.g., *Iliad* 9.158–161 (1867, 14–15) makes it quite clear that similarly, μηδέ of 18.126 responds to the two verbs in the first person (ἀποίμην, ἐφείην, 121 and 124), and not to line 125. Nikanor treats *Il.* 9.158–160 as an example of *dia mesou* (an insertion that interrupts the syntactic coherence), on which see Nünlist 2019. For a study of parenthesis in Latin poetry, see von Albrecht ²1994 (on *Ov. Met.*).

42 Stoevesandt 1994/1995, 183 notes that in Homer, the suffering of the victims generally qualifies the idea of heroic renown, rather than compounding or 'proving' it, but that Catull. 64 draws precisely on those passages that complicate the picture; similarly Schmale 2004, 252.

women mentioned in lines 122–124: a vague ‘they’ including all of the enemy, with the characteristic indeterminacy of spoken words and undertones of spite and, perhaps, vengefulness.⁴³

It is this very self-centred afterthought of Achilles’ speech that Catullus elaborates on, i.e. the intimate bond between (others’) grief and (the warrior’s own) renown that the parenthetical structure of line 125 does and does not suggest by leaving γυοῖεν syntactically unconnected to the previous development on κλέος. Catullus’ song of the Parcae picks up on the suggestion and makes the bond explicit, turning it, indeed, into the main point of the section on Achilles. In this sense, the interaction between the *Iliad* and Catullus 64 can illustrate a different kind of a ‘parenthesis of reception’, namely one where a parenthesis – now understood in a narrow sense – invites an elaborate response by a later author.⁴⁴ Catullus’ *fatebuntur*, on the one hand, spells out Achilles’ implicit claim in *Iliad* 18.125 that the women of the enemy, by realizing that he is the one who killed their loved ones, will contribute to his *kleos*; but on the other hand, it remains agnostic as to what the women actually perceive or think. Although the Parcae ascribe a positive judgement to them, it is precisely this judgement that makes the reader pause and wonder whether the women themselves subscribe to this interpretation of their gestures of grief. The message that is attributed to them with the verb *fatebuntur* is in line with the epic ideal of heroic *kleos*. But the reader might doubt that the mothers share it. It would seem that with *fatebuntur*, the Parcae make Achilles’ wish come true. But then, while the Achilles of *Iliad* 18 hoped that he might figure in the women’s thoughts, all we know in Catullus 64 is that their gestures are interpreted in such a way. About their thoughts we know nothing.

Catullus’ translation of thought (γυοῖεν) into message (*fatebuntur*) effectively disjoins the message from the sender and identifies it as a phenomenon of reception: gestures of mourning turn into avowals of the slayer’s greatness. On a larger scale, this translation exemplifies a simplistic and one-dimensional reception of the Iliadic Achilles and shows it up at the same time. Readers may well conclude that the Parcae, the purported singers of truth, are not to be believed. But unlike Apollo’s song (see above p. 48), the untrustworthiness of this song lies not in factual contradictions: it makes out Achilles’ life exactly as short as it will be. The song’s *perfidia*

⁴³ Such a reading would reinforce the parenthetical character of line 125, further disjoining it from τινα in 122.

⁴⁴ If we consider the entire prophetic section of the song as a development of *Iliad* 18.125, we might look at it as a variant of Alexandrian *Ergänzungsspiel* (Bing 1995), not in that a myth is completed or replenished, but in that an elliptical thought is spelled out and problematized. If in Homer parenthesis is largely a phenomenon of spoken language (see above n. 41), it is interesting to note that Catullus’ response eliminates precisely this dimension.

lies instead in the improbable judgements on the part of the witnesses, improbable not just on account of common sense or personal opinion.⁴⁵ Readers familiar with the literary tradition will realize that Catullus' Parcae are, so to speak, unreliable and manipulative readers of the *Iliad* and of Euripides. In another way, though, the song of the Parcae addresses the problematic truth that even the mothers of slain enemies, even Scamander, even Polyxena will, as a matter of fact, contribute to Achilles' repute. They will ensure that it is a complicated fame that is attached to his name.⁴⁶ But still, Achilles will be a protagonist, if a mute one. For not only are the witnesses silenced in the song of the Parcae, but so is Achilles. He has no say either in the way he will be remembered.

To replace Apollo, who is compromised by his *apistia*, Catullus could have chosen the Muses or Chiron, who are credited with singing Peleus and Thetis' wedding song in Pindar and in Euripides, respectively.⁴⁷ But unlike the Muses, the Parcae are not only omniscient prophets, they also possess agency: they make what they sing. Catullus portrays them as old women and dwells at some length on their frail bodies and dry lips (305, 316). This realism may in fact add 'a darker tone to the wedding'.⁴⁸ But regardless of their own age, much more decisive for Catullus' poem is their strong association with death. In the *Iliad*, Moira is the goddess of death, as in *Iliad* 16.849, where Patroclus says that he was 'killed by pernicious Fate and by Leto's son', and *moira* is the 'fate of death', as in Achilles' speech: 'So also shall I, if a like fate (ὁμοίη μοῖρα) has been fashioned for me, lie when I am dead' (18.120–121, see above n. 19). The Parcae, then, are figures that in themselves gesture towards Achilles' precocious death, which happens so quickly that it is not even mentioned in

45 This was a reproach addressed to Kinsey 1965, Curran 1969, Bramble 1970, and others by, e.g., Lefèvre 2000, 75. Lefèvre 2000, 77 argues that if the Achilles of Catull. 64 were a negative figure, Vergil could not have used this figure for his praise of Octavian in *ecl.* 4. Leaving aside the fact that this might be circular reasoning, the main point of the song is perhaps not to identify Achilles as a *Negativ-Figur*, but to expose the contradictions within the authenticating strategies it adopts. For a more sophisticated way of rescuing Catull. 64 as a positive intertext for *ecl.* 4, see Trimble 2013.

46 Sider 2020, 110 argues that instances of female mourning contribute to "establishing women as having a determinative role in controlling how men will be remembered".

47 *Pyth.* 3.88–92; *Iph. Aul.* 1036–1079. See Fernandelli 2012, 114–121 and 271–288; Klingner 1956, 21–25.

48 Bramble 1970, 28. I wonder, though, whether the negative perception of these elderly female figures is slightly gendered.

their song, but tacitly presupposed in the sacrifice of Polyxena.⁴⁹ Achilles' death eludes the reader, but the multiple deaths caused by him dominate the song.⁵⁰

In addressing Peleus and Thetis' progeny, then, the Parcae dwell on the one objective fact of a warrior's life, namely the death and the devastation it causes. But the way they evaluate this fact puts the spotlight on the clash between the victims' perspective and a flattened version of heroic ideology. A reader steeped in the literary tradition may remember that increasing his *kleos* by setting the Trojan women to mourn is a wish Achilles expresses in a particularly painful moment, that Scamander chides Achilles for polluting him with dead bodies, and that Polyxena shames the Greek warriors with her exceptional courage. None of these elements permits the reader to think that violence is to be condoned for the benefit of the warrior's *kleos*. While it is a fact that the latter is built on death and destruction, its meaning and value remain open to question. The result is not merely a refusal to take sides for the hero or his victims, but an invitation to reflect on the tension between remembering the *uirtutes* of heroes and the necessity to figure out what these words mean.⁵¹

To conclude, it has become clear that in *Iliad* 18, the crucial point of Achilles' argument regarding his own *kleos* is added in a parenthetical form, which means that it is at the same time included in and excluded from his speech. Catullus 64 resolves the parenthesis by fully integrating its content into the song of the Parcae and thus exposing its cruel logic. If a parenthesis includes and excludes at the same time, the song of the Parcae englobes both perspectives, for it embraces the thought encapsulated by Achilles' parenthesis but jeopardizes its value.⁵²

The parenthesis, then, has proven a useful tool to deepen our understanding of Catullus' technique and his treatment of the poetic tradition. Complementing such notions as the ellipsis and the snapshot which have already established themselves in the landscape of Catullan scholarship, the parenthesis draws attention to the

49 Schmale 2004, 253 notes that Achilles' spirit does not appear either to claim the sacrifice. Achilles' speedy death is anticipated by Thetis at *Iliad* 18.95–96: 'Doomed then to a speedy death, my child, will you be, from what you say; for immediately after Hector is your own death ready at hand.' (Transl. Murray 1999).

50 We do not learn anything about the internal audience's reception of the song (cf. Schmale 2004, 222).

51 The different strands of scholarship on Catullus 64 in the twentieth century, with some defending it as a genuine praise of heroes and others foregrounding the suffering of their victims, illustrates this challenge perfectly.

52 This resonates with Sistakou's discussion of Hellenistic epyllia, which suggests that "the perspective of eternity, as mirrored in the traditional notions of *kleos*, heroism or immortalization, has irrevocably become a thing of the past" (2009, 319).

appeal that this literary device could have on a poet like Catullus, who takes it as an invitation to expand on it and lay bare its implications by translating Achilles' words into a set of highly efficient silent tableaux.

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