

17. *Coma Berenices*

Aitia 4 ends, as *Aitia 3* began, with Queen Berenike II. There the queen's own athletic victory was celebrated, here her husband's recent military triumph furnishes, indirectly, the occasion for a poem. The *Diegesis* quotes the opening line and gives a brief summary:

He says that Conon placed the lock of Berenike among the stars: she had promised to dedicate it to the gods upon [Ptolemy's] return from the war against Syria.

The expedition referred to is the Third Syrian War (247--246 BC). More of the background appears in Hyginus (*Astronomica* 2. 24):

When Ptolemy had married Berenike . . . and had set out a few days later to attack Asia, Berenike vowed to cut a lock of her hair if Ptolemy were to return victorious; in accordance with this vow, she placed the dedicated lock in the temple of Aphrodite Arsinoë at Zephyrion, and did not find it there the next day; when the king was disturbed by what had happened, Conon the astronomer . . . eager to curry favour with him, said that the lock appeared to have been stationed among the stars; and he pointed out a certain shapeless group of seven stars and claimed that they were the lock.

Conon's timely 'discovery' gave Callimachus the idea for a poem. In it, the severed lock itself finds a voice, as often happens with dedicated objects in epigrams. It bewails its separation from Berenike's head and describes how it was snatched from Arsinoë's temple by divine agency and given a place in the heavens.

The poem survives in Callimachus' Greek and in a Latin translation by Catullus. The Greek text is fragmentary, the Latin fully preserved. In those places where we can match the one with the other, the Roman translator seems to have followed his Greek original with a fair degree of accuracy. Differences, however, do occur between translation and original, in sufficient number and of a kind to caution us against assuming that in those places where Callimachus' words have vanished Catullus has invariably given us a literal clue to what they were.

Whether Catullus also kept things in their original order is another question, impossible to answer in the present state of our knowledge. Pfeiffer assumed that he did, and on that assumption he used the Latin version as a guide to the placing and numbering of the surviving fragments of Callimachus' Greek. The result at least enables us to see

and experience the fragments in a poetic context. For that reason I have adopted Pfeiffer's arrangement here, though it may eventually prove to be, in one particular or another, more Catullan than Callimachean. Callimachus' own words, where we have them, are rendered poetically; where they are lacking, Catullus, rendered into prose, fills the gap. Some splicing at the seams between Greek original and Latin version was unavoidable and has been kept to a minimum.

Most spectacular of all Callimachus' *Aitia*, the constellation explained by it still bears the name *Coma Berenices*, The Lock of Berenike:

- 1 He who conned the sky mapped out
from end to end on charts, the wheeling
courses of the stars,
- 2-7 *their risings and their settings, how the burning brilliance of
the scorching sun is dimmed, how constellations retire at
determined intervals, how sweet love charms Diana down
from heaven, banished to a cave on Mount Latmus: that
same man,*
- 7/8 Conon, noticed me in the heavens,
Berenike's lock, that she had dedicated
to all the gods,
- 10-13 *her smooth arms raised in prayer, when the king, glorying in
his recent marriage, had gone to plunder the Assyrian
country, bearing*
- 13/14 [tokens of nocturnal struggle]
- 14-25 *waged for her maiden spoils. Are new brides truly averse to
Venus? Are the joys of their parents frustrated by feigned
tears shed in torrents as they step into the bedroom? By the
gods, their lamentations are not sincere! My queen taught
me as much with her many complaints, when her new
husband was on his way to grim battles. Or were you
grieving in abandonment not for your empty bed but for your
tearful separation from a dear brother? How deeply the pain
bit into your saddened heart! How distraught you were, your
whole mind in turmoil! And yet I had surely known that you
were*

- 26 [full of courage]
- 26-40 *from the time you were a girl. Or have you forgotten the
noble deed by which you won a royal marriage, a deed to
prove a man stronger than you, if another would dare it? But
what sad words you spoke on that occasion, when you sent
your husband off! How often you wiped the tears from your
eyes! What powerful god wrought the change in you? Or is
it that lovers wish to be no long distance from their beloved?
And then it was that you promised me to all the gods, with
sacrifice of bulls, in behalf of your sweet husband, should he
return. And in no time at all he had captured Asia and
added her to Egypt's territories. For these exploits I, duly
placed in heavenly company, fulfil an old-fashioned vow in a
novel way. Unwillingly, O Queen, I parted from your head,
unwillingly:*
- 40 I swear, by your head and by your life—
- 41-3 *no light oath: let him who slights it suffer as he should!
But who insists on matching himself against iron? Even
that mountain was uprooted, the region's greatest, over
which*
- 44 Theia's shining grandchild flies,
45 your mother's, Arsinoë's obelisk, and through
the middle of Mount Athos sailed
the murderous ships of the Medes.
What are mere locks of hair to do
when mountains like those
yield to iron?
- May they die,
the wicked Chalybes
who first brought steel to light,
an evil flower
sprouting from the earth—die, those
50 who first invented hammering!
- My sister tresses
were mourning me, just then cut off,
when Ethiopian Memnon's brother
swept in, his dappled wings awhirr,

a gale of softness,
 Lokrian Arsinoë's steed, who snatched me up
 55 in a breath of wind
 and bore me through the gleaming air
 to the lap of Kypris, and laid me there . . .
 chosen for that task
 by Zephyritis herself . . . who has her home
 on the Canopian shore.

And then,
 to keep the Minoan bride's [crown] . . .
 60 . . . from [shining] alone upon men . . .

but that I too,

Berenike's beautiful lock, might join
 the lights studding the heavens,
 Kypris placed me among them, wet
 from my first ocean bath and rising
 near the gods, to shine
 64 a new star cluster with the old.

65-7 *For between the constellations of Virgo and cruel Leo, next
 to Lycaonian Callisto, I turn to my setting, tardy Boötes
 following*

67 on our way oceanward . . . late in the autumn.

69-74 *But though the gods step over me at night, and dawn restores
 me to grey Tethys (Quiet, Rhamnusian maiden: let me
 speak here, for I shall not hide the truth for fear of anything,
 not even if the stars revile me with hostile words, to keep me
 from unfolding, sincerely, the secrets of my heart):*

75 I am not so delighted
 with all that,
 as I am grieved
 that I shall never touch
 that head again, from which I drank,
 when she was still a maiden, many
 a draught of ordinary oil
 78 and tasted not of womanly perfumes.

89-94 *But see to it, O Queen, when, beholding the stars, you
 worship divine Venus on festal days, that I am not without
 my share of ointment: ply me, rather, with generous gifts.
 Let the stars fall from the sky, so I but be a lock of hair on
 the queen's head! Orion could glower next to Aquarius then,
 for all I'd care!*

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*Translated by
Frank Nisetich*

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