Through the Airy Waves

Catullus 66.55

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άρτι [νεότμητόν με κόμαι ποθέεσκον ἀδελφεί,
καὶ πρόκατε γνωτὸς Μέμνονος Αἰθίοπος
ἰετο κυκλώσας βαλιὰ πτερὰ θῆλυς ἀήτης,
ἥππος[5] ἱοζώνου Λοκρικὸς Ἀρσινόης,
.].[.]ας[λ] πνο[ι] μὲ, δὶ' ἥ[έρα δ' ὑγρόν ἐνέ[κας]
Κύπρ]ιδος εἰς κόλ[ποις κ]έθηκε
(Callimachus fr. 110.51-56, Harder 2012)

abiunctae paulo ante comae mea fata sorores
lugebant, cum se Memnonis Aethiopis
unigena impellens nutantibus aera pennis
obtulit Arsinoes Locridos ales equos,
isque per aetherias me tollens auolat umbras
et Veneris casto collocat in gremio.
(Catullus 66.51-56, Mynors 1958)

As suggested in Catullus 65.15-16, Catullus 66 is a translation of a poem by Callimachus, partly preserved to us and known as fragment 110. As lines 51-56 illustrate, Catullus generally translates Callimachus’ poem closely. The only words in the passage that Catullus does not translate more or less literally are θῆλυς ἀήτης (fr. 110.53), ἱοζώνου (fr. 110.54), πνοιῇ and, so it seems, ἥ[έρα .].[.] πνο[ι]...

1 Apart from a few quotations in other ancient texts this poem, which is held to have concluded the fourth and last book of Callimachus’ Aetia, was unknown until the publication of two papyri, P.S.I. 1092 by G. Vitelli in 1929 and P. Oxy. 2258 by E. Lobel in 1952. For a convenient description of the two papyri, see Pfeiffer 1953, ix; xxiv-xxvi.
(fr. 110.55). Instead of ἠέρα...ὑγρόν the fourteenth century manuscripts O, G and R, our primary witnesses to the text of Catullus, transmit etherias...umbras (O) and ethereas...umbras (GR).² If the reading in the manuscripts is correct, Catullus seems to have changed ‘the wet air’ of Callimachus’ poem for ‘the aetherial shadows’.

This phrase has seemed somewhat mysterious to a number of scholars. Ioannes Calphurnius suggested in his 1481 edition the reading æthereas...auras,³ which finds a parallel in Catullus’ contemporary Lucretius’ aetheriae...aurae (3.405). Giancarlo Giardina has recently without a reference to Calphurnius suggested the reading of auras anew.⁴ In 1884 Alexander Riese wrote aetherias...umbras in his text, but discussed in his commentary the reading aerias...umbras,⁵ which would match the first half of Callimachus’ ἠέρα...ὑγρόν. This reading was (prior to Vitelli’s publication of the first papyrus) condemned in 1925 by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff in a note to his translation of the poem,⁶ but it has recently been defended by J.M. Trappes-Lomax on paleographical grounds.⁷

In 1987 Otto Zwierlein suggested that Catullus wrote aetherias...undas, which partly finds a parallel in Lucretius’ aerias...undas (2.152) and matches the latter half of Callimachus’ ἠέρα...ὑγρόν.⁸ This reading has won favour from Nino Marinone who used it in his double edition of the two poems.⁹ Zwierlein argues for the reading of aetherias by showing that aerius and aetherius could

² O = Oxoniensis Canonicianus class. lat. 30; G = Parisinus lat. 1437; R = Vaticanus Ottobonianus lat. 1829. The manuscript T = Parisinus lat. 8071 is a ninth/tenth century witness to poem 62 (see note 12).
³ Calphurnius 1481, 41 (unnumbered pages).
⁵ Riese 1884, 207: “umbras: man vergleicht Aen. 5, 838, aus welcher Stelle aber hervorgeht, dass entweder aerias umbras oder aetherias auras zu lesen ist. Der klare Äther kennt keinen Schatten.”
⁶ Von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1925, 216 n. 1: “Per aetherias umbras ist nicht gut übersetzt, denn aether und umbra vertragen sich nicht; was Kallimachos sagte, war etwas wie σκοτίοι δ’ ἠέρος, Apoll. Rhod. 3, 1379; aber man soll nicht aerias einsetzen.”
⁷ Trappes-Lomax 2012, 643: “aerias written as erias might well be bulked out to aetherias by a dangerously alert scribe.”
⁹ Marinone 1997, 68.