CATULLUS 66.1: DISPEXIT OR DESPEXIT?

Omnia qui magni despexit lumina mundi
qui stellarum ortus comperit atque obitus
(Catullus 66.1–2)

Πάντα τὸν ἐν γραμμαῖσιν ἠδὼν ὤρον ἃ τε φέγονται
(Callimachus 110 [Pfeiffer]).

All the manuscripts of Catullus’ Coma Berenices read despexit in the first line, but, as far as I am aware, every printed text for the last two hundred years has adopted not the manuscript reading but John Calpurnius’ emendation, dispexit, originally suggested in 14811. The change does not at first sight seem an unreasonable one. Despexit must mean “looked down”, an apparently difficult position for one observing the stars; dispexit, “saw clearly and distinctly”, seems much more appropriate, and has the advantage of a good Lucretian pedigree: nec tellus obstat quin omnia dispiciantur (3.26).

Modern editors, however, enjoy an advantage not shared by Calpurnius, as a result of the publication, in 1934, of a papyrus from Tebtynis that preserves the first line of the Callimachean original2. This discovery might have been the occasion for a reexamination of the the reading of the Catullan version; such, however, has not been the case. B. Rehm was among the first to point out what he saw as the inadequacy of Catullus’ translation, remarking that “Catulls Wiedergabe: ‘omnia qui magni dispexit lumina mundi’ entfernt sich nicht unbeträchtlich vom Original”3. But Rehm, and other scholars who have commented on this line, still retain Calpurnius’ dispexit and judge Catullus’ failure to convey the content of Callimachus not by his own words but by Calpurnius’ emendation, which has acquired such authority that it has come to be treated almost as the original reading of the manuscripts and not as a conjecture.

1) R. Ellis, Catulli Veronensis Liber (Oxford 1867) ad loc., cites two other early emendations, Bentley’s descripsit and Casaubon’s suspexit.


3) “Catull 66.1 und der neue Kallimachosfund”, Philologus 89 (1934) 385–6. Rehm attempts to bring Catullus closer to Callimachus by the further emendation of lumina to limina.
The opening lines of Callimachus' poem, we can safely assume, consist of an encomium on the skills of Conon as an astronomer. They state that he looked at the universe \( \varepsilon \nu \gamma \rho \alpha \mu \mu \alpha \imath \tau \iota \) and (here we must supplement the fragmentary Greek with the aid of the Catullan version) calculated the movements of the stars: \( \delta \rho \omicron \nu \tilde{\eta} \tau \epsilon \tilde{\phi} \rho \omicron \omicron \tau \alpha i \). The key phrase is \( \varepsilon \nu \gamma \rho \alpha \mu \mu \alpha \imath \tau \iota \), since it shows that Callimachus was laying emphasis not so much on Conon's physical observations as on his role as a theoretical and mathematical astronomer. C.A. Tyrpanis, in the Loeb edition of Callimachus, suggests that "on the charts of the stars the sky was divided by lines into sections. This probably is the meaning of \( \varepsilon \nu \gamma \rho \alpha \mu \mu \alpha \imath \tau \iota \)\). But one can go beyond this, since \( \gamma \rho \alpha \mu \mu \eta \) has an even narrower technical meaning: it refers to the lines used in diagrammatic representations of the constellations, in which stars of major magnitude are joined by straight lines\(^5\). Thus the scholiast on Aratus 190 says of Cassiopeia (shaped like a giant "W"), \( \eta \mu \epsilon \nu \pi \omega \tau \eta \ \gamma \rho \alpha \mu \mu \eta \ \epsilon \alpha \tau \tau \iota \ \tau \sigma \omega \iota \mu \alpha, \eta \delta \pi \lambda \alpha \gamma \iota \tau \ \alpha \gamma \omicron \nu \alpha \tau \alpha \). That these diagrammatic representations were as common on maps of the constellations of the ancient world as they are in the modern is indicated by a line of Leonidas, \( \eta \nu \omega \pi \omega \tau \eta \ \gamma \rho \alpha \mu \mu \alpha \iota \nu \ \epsilon \tau \tau \iota \ \tau \sigma \omega \iota \mu \alpha \nu \ \tau \eta \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu \ \nu
two expressions to bring out Callimachus' meaning. That constellations are involved he shows by the phrase omnia lumina; that he conceives of them as being on charts he shows by the word despexit, i.e. Conon looked down on them. Despicere, which usually implies looking down from a height, is a splendid verb to use of an omniscient astronomer who can survey the whole universe merely by looking down at his charts. All in all, given the limitations of the Latin language, it must be conceded that Catullus has made an earnest effort to convey the meaning of his Greek model⁸). Dispexit is undoubtedly an elegant emendation, but the despexit of the manuscripts does reflect the Callimachean original, and there is no reason why it can not be retained.

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⁸) It is interesting that Catullus skilfully maintains the emphasis of πνεύμα at the beginning of the poem, although his omnia has a totally different syntactical function.