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CATULLUS 17 AND THE PRIAPEAN

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In recent years significant advances have been made towards a fuller understanding of *O Colonia*. Speculation about the identity of the colony and its bridge (the 'topographical' fallacy) has been tacitly abandoned, since it can contribute little to the central point of the poem.¹ Critics have likewise begun to realise that preoccupation with the ritual *sexagenarios de ponte* (the 'ceremonial' heresy) has obfuscated Catullus' poetic intention;² it is now time to state flatly that this rite is known to be associated only with the *pons sublicius* at Rome, and that since no connexion is posited between the ceremony and bridges in Cisalpine Gaul, the massive learning of Robinson Ellis, J. G. Frazer and others who have studied this annual rite should be less in evidence in commentaries on the poem. The 'ceremonial' heresy has not merely led critics to interpret Catullus' language in the opening lines too simplistically because of the obsessive notion of a religious gathering, but has also caused too many readers to approach

¹ This is not to deny that there is a real *mise-en-scène* for the poem which Catullus' contemporaries could identify. But speculation about the site — Cologne? (Muretus), Cremona? (Kroll), Novum Comum? (Scaliger), Mantua? (Cluvier), Verona? (most recently Fordyce) — has distracted attention from Catullus' central purpose.

² See Kenneth Quinn, G&R 16 (1969) 19ff., rightly taking to task E. Fraenkel's over-attachment to the ceremony (in JRS 51 [1961] 51) as an interpretative tool. But *sexagenarios de ponte* still looms large in the introduction to this poem in Quinn's edition (London 1970).

the poem with a preconceived image of the husband as an elderly (sexagenarian) dolt.³

Niall Rudd's article⁴ leads us to the heart of the matter. The poet's central aim is to depict the contrasting personalities of a frisky young wife and a lazy, complaisant husband, and to suggest the means by which their increasingly shaky relationship may be transformed. The contrast between the married pair is achieved in two main ways which dictate the structure of the poem. In the first part (1—11; Catullus' request to the *colonia* to allow him to push the husband off its bridge), the description of the community's sportive behaviour on the rickety structure amusingly prefigures the roles of wife (signified by the *colonia*) and husband (signified by the bridge) in a marriage in danger of imminent collapse. The second section (12—22), offering the reason for this request, is a skilfully constructed nexus of antithetical similes and images to intensify this amusing contrast between the couple. Then in the final lines (23—26) Catullus as marriage-counsellor restates his solution, a ducking for the husband from the bridge into the muddy swamp.⁵ Rudd here has recourse to Celsus to air the suggestion that this is a *medical* cure, but is himself the first to recognise the pitfalls in this suggestion. Another critic puts forward the more probable thesis of a baptismal rebirth, but develops this suggestion in a most improbable direction.⁶ I should like

³ So Quinn at line 13: "The child is not just an imagined two-year-old, but the son of C.'s *municeps* — ex hypothesi old and feeble like the bridge, possibly even a *sexagenarius*..."

⁴ Colonia and her Bridge: a Note on the Structure of Catullus 17, TAPA 90 (1959) 238ff.

⁵ A more complex structure is discerned by T. P. Wiseman, *Cinna the Poet* (Leicester 1974), 63f. — a seven-line Introduction followed by a concentric arrangement in 8—26. I exploit Rudd's tripartite division as a more appropriate frame for my general observations.

⁶ H. Akhbar Khan, *Image and Symbol in Catullus 17*, CP 64 (1969) 88ff. The article combines useful insights with improbable speculations. The notion that Catullus depicts the swamp as 'an old hag, a dilapidated and decrepit prostitute' belongs to the realm of fantasy; when combined with the additional suggestion that the swamp contains the waters of regeneration it bewilders. The suggestion of a baptismal regeneration, in itself valuable, is marred by a connexion posited with the Baptae, worshippers of Cotys-Cybele, and by the allegations that the husband of the poem 'behaved like a *cinaedus*', is a 'queer', and a transvestite, for none of which the poem offers the slightest evidence.

to consider this notion of a regeneration by baptism further by examination of the implications of the metre deployed for the poem.

As a preliminary, however, it will be useful to develop the ideas of Rudd and others in clarifying the message of the first two sections of the composition.

I

The poem begins with the address direct. "You, *colonia*, would like to sport on your long bridge." The personification, a figure dear to Catullus' heart,⁷ 'foreshadows the young wife' (Rudd), and *ludere* has the connotation of sexual sport as well as depicting the colony at play. Fordyce's rendering, 'to hold a religious festival', perpetuates the 'ceremonial' heresy. *et salire paratum habes*, 'and are ready for ups-and-downs': Quinn remarks on *salire*: 'to jump around, a general word linked by its context and by the fact that the word evokes *the name of the ceremony*' (my italics). But *salire* has the particular meaning, found often in the farming manuals, of covering or copulating; the regular usage is of the male covering the female, but in our poem the *colonia* covers the bridge. But she fears for the *inepta crura ponticuli*; *crura* is regularly used of the legs of animals and humans (Merrill), and the adjective *inepta* points forward to *insulsissimus*, used of the husband in line 12 (Rudd). Then the 'long bridge' of line 1 has become 'the poor dear bridge', the diminutive indicating the affectionate scorn felt for the bridge-husband by the *colonia* his wife. She fears that he may fall *supinus* under her weight, and lie flat (*recumbat*) in the engulfing marsh.

Next Catullus expresses a prayer, *sic tibi bonus ex tua pons libidine fiat*, not 'May you get a fine new bridge' (Fordyce), since this would demolish the correspondence between bridge and husband, but 'May your bridge become good', in other words be restored as good as new. *Ex tua libidine* must be translated to suggest sexual satisfaction, not rendered merely 'to your liking'. Quinn writes in his introduction to the poem: "Perhaps a ducking, while *magically* (my italics) restoring the bridge to

⁷ We think at once of Sirmio as faithful retainer (Poem 31), of the farm at Tibur as devoted nurse (44), of the yacht as retired slave (4).

health and strength, will make a new man of the husband." But this is to misinterpret the nature of the contractual prayer. 'If you do A, may you get B' simply implies that the Roman gods, *who work through men*, are asked to acknowledge the religious gesture by inspiring the city-magistrates or a local well-wisher (perhaps a Valerius Catullus)⁸ to restore the bridge. The formulaic *sic* (line 5), the patterned alliteration (*in quo uel Salisubsali sacra suscipiantur, / munus hoc mihi maximi da, Colonia, risus*),⁹ the reference to the deity Salisubsalus ('the holy Bounder', to whom we must return) conspire to provide a sacral flavour for the poem. But *munus* bears the sense of 'favour' (Fordyce) or 'task' (Quinn) rather than that of 'public exhibition' suggested by Ellis and Kroll under the hypnotic influence of the 'ceremonial' heresy.

In the second main section (12—22), Rudd draws attention to the artistic structure with which Catullus recounts the reason for his request. First, the husband is witless, like a sleeping child (line 12); second, the wife is ripe and frisky (lines 14—16); and third, the husband makes no attempt to rouse himself and is like a log in a ditch (lines 17—19). The effect, as Rudd notes, is chiasitic: witless husband (12), simile (12—13), desirable bride (14—16), indolent husband (18), simile (18—19). In fact the chiasitic structure is still more ambitious; the girl is described by a metaphor and two comparisons which balance the similes characterising the husband. First, she is *uiridissimo flore* (14), and this metaphor of ripeness and growth is intensified by a second superlative expression, *nigerrimis uuis* (16). By contrast with this picture of greenness and ripeness, the husband is in the second simile like wood cut down (*alnus suppernata*). Secondly, the girl is *tenellulo delicatior haedo*, a phrase which simultaneously suggests softness and friskiness: but as the image is in marked contrast with the husband as a sleeping child, the meaning uppermost in *delicatior* must be 'friskier', the expression being similar to

⁸ T. P. Wiseman, JRS 69 (1979) 168, recalls that Catullus' father entertained Julius Caesar (Suet. Iul. 73), owned the finest site for a villa in Cisalpine Gaul, and in short was a local *princeps*.

⁹ On the sacral alliteration, see C. P. Jones, 'Parody in Catullus 44', H 96 (1968) 379ff.; and in general H. Kleinknecht, *Die Gebetsparodie in der Antike* (Stuttgart 1937), 159ff.

the Ovidian phrase *tenero lascivior haedo*.¹⁰ So in this studied contrast between husband and wife the chiasmic pattern portrays the husband as a sleeping child (A), the wife as sprouting flower and ripe fruit (B), the wife as frisky kid (C), and the husband as a cut-down log (D); the ambitious antithesis simultaneously contrasts the images in A and C and those in B and D within the chiasmic structure.

So much for the striking technique of exposition of frolicsome girl and sleepy husband. We can now turn to the nature of Catullus' remedy, the point of which may be elucidated by the poet's use of the Priapean metre.

II

Critics and editors have been slow to investigate the possible significance of Catullus' choice of metrical form in this poem, in spite of the fact that his skilful deployment of metre to enhance meaning is widely recognised in other compositions.¹¹ Fordyce calls this combination of glyconic and pherecratean 'the rollicking Priapean metre', but then proceeds to offer earlier exemplars from Pindar, Aeschylus and Sophocles. Clearly for none of these instances is the word 'rollicking' the *mot juste*; these references are so much learned lumber. Examples of the use of the metre in Hellenistic and Roman contexts are more suggestive, though few such compositions have survived. Editors claim that the metre is by this later stage confined to hymns, but it would be more accurate to define the poetry in which it is found as 'poems with a religious connexion, often concerning Priapus'.

Catullus fr. 1, for example, is explicitly addressed to Priapus in his capacity as patron of Lampsacus:

¹⁰ Ovid, Met. 13,791, perhaps evoking Catullus. The possible debt of Catullus in this image to Theocritus 11 has been thoroughly discussed by editors.

¹¹ Most obviously in the deployment of the Sapphic metre in the Lesbia-poems, in the exploitation of the antithetical balance of the elegiac couplet to express the two-sidedness of love, and at another level, the use of the pure iambic to indicate the yacht's smooth progress in Poem 4.

*hunc lucum tibi dedico consecroque, Priape,
qua domus tua Lampsaci est, quaque <-U>, Priape,
nam te praecipue in suis urbibus colit ora
Hellespontia, ceteris ostriosior oris.*

Here, then, the metre is used for a dedication-poem to Priapus. Elsewhere too Priapus is central. In a well-known poem in the Appendix Vergiliana,¹² Priapus as the guardian-deity of a garden urges local youths not to thieve from the plot which is under his protection.

Fragments of other poems indicate that the metre may be used for invocations to deities other than Priapus. In the fragment¹³

Δέξαι τὰν ἀγαθὰν τύχαν, δέξαι τὰν ὑγίαιαν,
ἂν φέρομεν παρὰ τᾶς θεοῦ, ἂν ἐκαλέσσατο τήνα...

("Accept good fortune, accept good health which we obtain from the goddess, and to which the goddess gave its name..."), it seems probable that the benefits of Hygiaea, daughter of Asclepius, are being hymned. The connexion with life and health is suggested also in an invocation to a deity unknown in a fragment of Maecenas:¹⁴

*debilem facito manu, debilem pede coxo,
tuber adstrue gibberum, lubricos quate dentes;
uita dum superest, bene est. hanc mihi, uel acuta
si sedeam cruce, sustine...*

In all four compositions the metre has clear religious connexions, and in two of them Priapus is the deity concerned. Perhaps the most suggestive parallel of all is a passage from Euphronios Chersites¹⁵ baldly adduced by Kroll:

οὐ βέβηλος, ᾧ τελεσταὶ τοῦ νέου Διονύσου...
κἀγὼ ἔξ εὐεργεσίης ὠργιασμένος ἦκω
ὀδεύων Πηλουσιακὸν κνεφαῖος παρὰ τέλμα...

¹² Priap. 3.

¹³ Bergk, PLG 3, p. 1312.

¹⁴ Fr. 4 Morel.

¹⁵ Powell, Coll. Alex. 176ff.

("I am not a profane person, priests of the young Dionysus... Having been initiated, I have come here out of good will, journeying in darkness to the swamp of Pelusium...")

The spokesman-initiate has come to the marshy Pelusium on the eastern bank of the Nile, where priests are in attendance, presumably baptising devotees in the purificatory waters of the river. Pelusium, allegedly founded by Isis,¹⁶ was a centre of Isiac worship; and Dionysus is syncretistically identified with Osiris.¹⁷ The son of Isis and Osiris, Horus, is likewise identified with Priapus.¹⁸ So 'the young Dionysus' of this poem is Horus-Priapus, and the devotees at the swamp of Pelusium are being initiated into the cult of the young god.

Can it be mere coincidence that Catullus 17, composed in the same Priapean metre, demands that the indolent husband be pushed into the Cisalpine swamp to cause him to emerge invigorated and virile? It seems probable that metre and prayer-formula combine to describe not so much a punishment or a medical treatment as *a comic baptism* in which the husband can suddenly (*repente*, line 24) achieve a transformation and leave behind his *supinum animum* (25). The key to the riddle proposed by the poem is not medicine, but the mysteries.

What, then, are the *sacra Salisubsali*?¹⁹ The ambivalent sense of *ludere* and *salire*, embracing jollification in general and sexual activity in particular, is here being extended. The overt reference is to Mars and his cult of the Salii; the bridge would certainly have to be strengthened to bear such bouncing as that. But the sexual undertones in *ludere* and *salire* indicate that *Salisubsalus*, with its comic suggestion of sexual bounding, may be a soubriquet also of Priapus, as would be appropriate in a poem composed in the same metre as the dedication-piece to Priapus of Lampsacus (fr. 1). The title *Salisubsalus* is almost certainly an invented one.²⁰ The ducking if visualised as a comic initiation-ceremony,

¹⁶ Plutarch, *De Iside* 357E.

¹⁷ Plutarch, *De Iside* 356B, 362B, 364D—F.

¹⁸ See the *Suda*, s.v. *Priapos*.

¹⁹ I share with Fordyce the conviction that Birt's *Sali*, *subsili* is an improbable emendation.

²⁰ See Fordyce's discussion of Guarinus' alleged discovery of a fragment of Pacuvius containing the name. Unless further evidence is uncovered, a sceptical attitude seems the only possible stance.

which will bring new life to the inanimate husband, satisfyingly integrates the theme and the metrical form.

So the poem is an abusive attack upon a complaisant husband, real or imaginary. The relationship between the vigorous young wife and the spiritless husband is sketched first by the amusing parallel with the *colonia* and the bridge, the bridge being too feeble to sustain the bouncing colony; and secondly by the artistic balance of images and similes. The Priapean metre is employed to lend the poem both a licentious sexual tone and a comically sacral flavour, because the ducking which the husband will undergo is to be a *renouatio*, a rebirth by baptism similar to that employed in the liturgy of the Isiac mysteries.

Version

"Colony, so keen for sport on your long bridge, all ready for some ups-and-downs but afraid for the badly-fitting supports of your poor dear bridge resting on its shoring of renewed timber, in case it falls flat and flops on its back in the engulfing marsh; my prayer is that your bridge becomes good enough to satisfy your lusty wants, good enough to bear the rites even of the holy Bounder — provided, Colony, that you do me this favour which will make me laugh my head off.

I want a fellow-townsmen of mine to fall head over heels from your bridge right down into the mud, just where the morass of the entire marsh and stinking bog is blackest and deepest. He's a most insipid chap; he hasn't the wit of a two-year-old sleeping in his father's rocking arms. He's married to a girl in the fullest blossom, a girl friskier than a playful young goat, one who should be tended more lovingly than the blackest of grapes. But he lets her sport at will, and doesn't give a damn; he makes no effort to rise to the occasion. Just as an alder, hamstrung by a Ligurian axe, lies in a ditch with as much awareness of the world as if it didn't exist at all, so this idiot acquaintance of mine sees nothing, hears nothing, doesn't know who he is or even whether he is or isn't.

So now I want to push him head-first from your bridge, hoping that he can dispel his dull lethargy at a stroke, and leave his spineless spirit stuck in the heavy mud, as a mule leaves its iron shoe in the clinging mire."