

Clumsy and Clever Spiders on Hermann's Bridge: Catullus 68.49–50 and *Culex* 1–3 *)

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Nec tenuem texens sublimis aranea telam
in deserto Alli nomine opus faciat. (Cat. 68.49–50).

Lusimus, Octavi, gracili modulante Thalia
atque ut araneoli tenuem formavimus orsum;
lusimus: haec propter culicis sint carmina docta. (*Culex* 1–3)

3 culicis *codd. plerique*: culici *Mellicensis* | docta *codd. plerique*: dicta *Vat. 2759*
recc.: ducta *Ross*.

In 68. 41–50, Catullus tells the Muses that he cannot be silent about Allius' service to him, lest future ages grow forgetful of it. Rather he wishes Allius' reputation to increase after his death, and the poet ends the section (49–50) with the hope that no spider will weave its thin web over the name of Allius. It may seem odd that here, in this moment of homage, Catullus shows with *sublimis* | *aranea* the only violation of Hermann's bridge in all of his hexameter and longer elegiac poems. Callimachus had unfailingly avoided word division after a fourth foot trochee, as did Aratus, whose only exceptions have a monosyllabic postpositive before the bridge.¹⁾ Although Catullus allows four violations of the bridge in his epigrams, in keeping with their natively Latin, not Alexandrian tradition,²⁾ his practices for epic and elegiac were stricter. It is important to note that lines 49–50 do not even come from the introductory section of the poem (lines 1–40), which has a rougher and more colloquial style, and may well be a separate poem,³⁾ but rather the metrical violation comes from a highly polished, Neoteric context. It is, however,

*) I would like to thank Dr. R. O. A. M. Lyne for the advice he gave me concerning this article.

¹⁾ P. Maas: *Greek Metre* (tr. Lloyd-Jones, Oxford, 1962), pp. 60, 62. *Aranea* is metrically difficult: it will not fit into a hexameter in oblique cases, and in the nominative it can only stand (as here) in violation of Hermann's bridge, after the first foot trochee, or after the weak caesura of the third foot, with a resulting Bucolic diaeresis. *Araneolus*, however, provides a convenient synonym. Catullus was not without options in 68. 49.

²⁾ D. O. Ross, Jr.: *Style and Tradition in Catullus* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 167–169.

³⁾ Cf. C. J. Fordyce: *Catullus, A Commentary* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 341–3; Ross: *op. cit.*, pp. 121, 137, n. 54.

this very Neoteric context that explains the breach of Hermann's bridge: in its setting the anomalous metre is a deliberate and witty reminder about the intricacies of Neoteric poetry, of Catullus' control of his genre.

The immediate image in lines 49–50, following *mortuus* (48), is, of course, that of a cobweb over Allius' epitaph,⁴) but both the spider and its '*tenuis tela*' are arguably terms of the Neoteric vocabulary of poetic composition. *Tenuis* is a Latin (and probably Neoteric) translation of the Alexandrian *λεπτός*, as has been amply noted and discussed.⁵) Spiders as images for poetry have been more elusive, but weaving as a metaphor for poetry, expressed by terms such as *ὑφαίνω*, *ὑφος*, *texo* and compounds, *tela*, and *orsus* can imply the spider's activity,⁶) and there is at least one case where the spider is *explicitly* an image for the Neoteric poet—the opening of the *Culex*.⁷) The usage in this passage is so bold and clear that it suggests the convention was well known, perhaps even to the point of being stock for parody.⁸) *Culex* 1 is a Neoteric opening that recalls the beginning of Verg. *Ecl.* 6:⁹)

Prima Syracosio dignata est *ludere* versu
nostra nec erubuit silvas habitare *Thalea*

⁴) W. Kroll: *Catullus*⁵ (Stuttgart, 1968), p. 226; Fordyce: op. cit., p. 349, which notes Propertius 2.6.35: 'non immerito velavit aranea fanum.'

⁵) Cf., e.g., Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.224–5, 'cum lamentamur non adparere labores / nostros et tenui deducta poemata filo' and Hor. *Carm.* 2.16.37–40, 'mihi parva rura et / spiritum Graiae tenuem Camenae / Parca non mendax dedit et malignum / spernere volgus' discussed, along with other examples in J. K. Newman: *Augustus and the New Poetry*, Coll. Latomus 88 (Brussels, 1967) pp. 309–310; D. O. Ross, Jr.: *HSCP* 79 (1975), 252; D. O. Ross, Jr.: *Backgrounds to Augustan Poetry* (Cambridge, 1975) pp. 19, 27 n. 1, 76, 135, 148; C. O. Brink: *Horace on Poetry 3: Epistles Book 2* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 242.

⁶) On the metaphor of weaving as literature, cf. R. O. A. M. Lyne: *Ciris, A Poem Attributed to Vergil* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 101, 109.

⁷) Mr. Robert Fitzwilliam calls to my attention Aeschylus' parody of Euripides in Ar. *Ra* 1313ff., which links spiders (*φάλαγγες*), weaving (*εἰλίσσετε*), and the shuttle (*κερκίδος*) with singing (*ᾄδου*), and the music loving (*φίλαυλος*) dolphin, but this is too much of a jumble to be a reliable witness to poetic imagery. It is further complicated, as W. B. Stanford: *Aristophanes, The Frogs* (London, 1958), p. 183 notes, by an element of parody: *ὑπωρόφιοι φάλαγγες* recalls Pi. *P.* 1.97, *φόρμιγγες ὑπωρόφιοι*.

⁸) For a discussion of parody in the *Culex* cf. Ross: *HSCP* 79 (1975), 235–263, which notes among other features, the overdeveloped description of the light, the hyperbole of the snake, the chaotic jumble of characters in the description of Diana's grove. Cf. further n. 10, below.

⁹) Ross: *Backgrounds to Augustan Poetry* (Cambridge, 1975) p. 27, n. 1.

and the next line makes an explicit connection between the Neoteric poet at his game and the spider making its fine-spun web.¹⁰⁾

Returning now to Catullus 68.49, we are in a better position to interpret the diction and metre. Here at the start of the elegiac narrative Catullus is admonishing Allius that if his name is to live unobscured by time, it should not be associated with clumsy verse. Behind the concrete description of spider and web is an image of poet and poem. It is fitting in normal existence for an *arana* to be *sublimis*, but the poetaster-spider can only be *sublimis* ironically, when it is just at this point that his bad versification shows he knows nothing of metrical refinement. Such work is like a cobweb over the epitaph, when instead Allius' name should be linked to poetry that is careful and learned. Catullus' violation of Hermann's bridge is not a sign of roughness, rather it is a sign of his intense awareness of his poetic program.¹¹⁾

¹⁰⁾ In addition to this firm identification of poet and spider, line 3 is very likely to be a play upon the literal and figurative meaning of spider. F. Leo: *Culex* (Berlin, 1891), p.26 followed the advice of his unnamed *doctus amicus* and explained the syntax as *propter culicis* (acc. pl.) with the sense that the lowly *culex* as the subject of a learned poem is indeed a *ludus*. W. Clausen: *HSCP* 68 (1964), 127 rejected this as a 'bad conjecture' and joined *propter* with *haec* in anastrophe, leaving *culicis* as a genitive of specification. Ross: *HSCP* 79 (1975), 252-3, noting the difficulties of both explanations, suggested 'haec propter culici sint carmina ducta,' which he interprets, 'because we poets are spiders (*haec propter*) let's have a poem about a gnat.' If the author is in fact so playing with the notion of the spider as a fly catcher and the spider as poet, it is further evidence that the convention of poet as spider was easily recognizable – to the point of being available for parody.

¹¹⁾ Deliberate violation of metrical rules demands a study of its own. I cite here only in passing the discussion in M. Zicàri: *Phoenix* 18 (1964), 205 of Prop. 2.32.45, 'haec eadem ante illam impune et Lesbia fecit,' where Zicàri suggests that 'while Propertius is excusing Cynthia by recalling the behaviour of Lesbia, in intentionally applying a hiatus characteristic of Catullus' techniques he conveys a subtle allusion to the older poet, who had once been as patient a lover as he.'