

RHYTHMICAL FACTORS IN CATULLUS 72, 75, AND 85

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CATULLUS' ELEGIAIC VERSE is predominantly spondaic. He has dactyls in only 37 per cent of the variable feet (that is, in the first four feet of the hexameter and the first two of the pentameter), as against 44 per cent in Propertius, 48 per cent in Tibullus, and 57 per cent in Ovid.¹ This being so, predominantly dactylic passages or couplets stand out, and invite the assumption that some special effect is intended. It is the purpose of this article to pursue this assumption with reference to three of the shorter poems. This may be purely a question of art, in that a good poet is likely to assimilate rhythm to content; but it may also be relevant to interpretation, as one of the keys to the tone or emotional level of passages where the tone or emotional level is in doubt.

There are three couplets in Catullus, all of them in the longer elegies, where the variable feet are wholly dactylic, and various explanations can be offered for the dactylic rhythm in these three places.² But I wish rather to concentrate on the most dactylic of the epigrams, namely poems 75 and 85.³ Each of these has dactyls in 67 per cent of the variable feet, which is almost twice as many as Catullus' average, and it seems reasonable to see this as significant. Now it would be generally agreed that these two poems are part of a sequence of poems which includes also poem 72, and that this sequence represents Catullus' attempt to express, or formulate, the conflict of emotions which is epitomized in the phrase *odi et amo*.⁴ So the obvious areas in which to look for an explanation of the

¹These figures, which are approximate, are taken or deduced from M. Platnauer, *Latin Elegiac Verse* (Cambridge 1951) 36-37.

²The couplets concerned are 66.57-58, 66.93-94, and 68.117-118. We may note that all three are concluding couplets, in the first case of a long section of the narrative (I here prefer Quinn's colon at the end of line 56 to Mynors' full-stop), in the second of the whole poem, and in the third of a paragraph. It is interesting that scholars have felt two of these couplets to make rhythmically effective climaxes but for other reasons than their purely dactylic nature. K. F. Quinn in *Catullus: The Poems* (London 1970) 363 sees a concluding flourish in the spondaic fifth foot and four-word pentameter of 66.57-58; and D. A. West in *CQ* 7 (1957) 102 notes the effectiveness of 66.94 as being the only precisely symmetrical pentameter in Catullus.

³I here discount the mutilated fragment 95b, which has five dactyls in the six variable feet of its single couplet.

⁴For example, K. F. Quinn in *Catullus: An Interpretation* (London 1972) 108 says, "Poem 85 belongs in the same series as Poems 72 and 75," and C. J. Fordyce in *Catullus: A Commentary* (Oxford 1961) 365 refers to "the mental conflict which is conveyed . . . in three short poems, 72, 75, and 85."

dactylic rhythm of poems 75 and 85 are their function in the sequence as a whole and their relation to the underlying emotional conflict.

Let us first examine the metre of the three poems of the sequence, here reproduced from Mynors' Oxford text:

*Dicebas quondam solum te nosse Catullum,
Lesbia, nec prae me uelle tenere Iovem.
dilexi tum te non tantum ut uulgus amicam,
sed pater ut gnatos diligit et generos.
nunc te cognoui: quare etsi impensius uror,
multo mi tamen es uilior et leuior.
qui potis est, inquis? quod amantem iniuria talis
cogit amare magis, sed bene uelle minus.* [72]

*Huc est mens deducta tua mea, Lesbia, culpa
atque ita se officio perdidit ipsa suo,
ut iam nec bene uelle queat tibi, si optima fias,
nec desistere amare, omnia si facias.* [75]

*Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris?
nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.* [85]

The metrical features of this sequence can be most clearly displayed in tabulated form, though one hesitates to reduce poetry to statistical averages or to set out figures based on such small samples with such a degree of pomp. One thing which is immediately obvious is that poem 72 is much less dactylic than poems 75 and 85. The number of dactyls per couplet in the variable feet of the three poems is as follows:

72	75	85
1.75	4.0	4.0

For comparison, the average for Catullus' elegiacs as a whole is 2.2 dactyls per couplet. But this is not the only metrical development in the sequence, and we may be wise to see it in relation to two others. The number of elisions per couplet increases from each poem to the next, as the following table shows:

72	75	85
1.0	2.5	3.0

These figures should be compared with the average of 1.2 for Catullus' elegiacs as a whole and of 1.5 for the epigrams.⁵ Furthermore, the number

⁵See D. O. Ross, Jr., *Style and Tradition in Catullus* (Cambridge, Mass. 1969) 120–121. The differences in style between the elegies and the epigrams, for which see also J. Duhigg in *Antichthon* 5 (1971) 57–67, do not affect the present discussion.

of clauses per couplet also increases (meaning, of course, that the length of the clauses decreases).⁶ The figures are:

72	75	85
2.75	3.0	7.0

Any statistics based on such small units are liable to distortion by random factors, but it is hard not to regard the three parallel developments as in some way significant. Taken by itself, the increase in dactyls might only represent some natural tendency in Catullus to move towards a dactylic climax;⁷ but in this context we should rather look for an explanation which will account for all three of the metrical developments noted. As far as elisions are concerned, it has been rightly observed that Catullus seems to have felt the use of elisions to be particularly appropriate to the expression of intense emotion,⁸ and the progression here from a small to a large number of elisions would therefore suggest an increasing emotional intensity. As for the length of clauses, it can be shown, from poem 76 in particular, that Catullus used long measured clauses in passages of controlled reflection and series of short clauses in ones of more agitated emotion,⁹ and it looks as if the progression here can be explained in this way. It seems, then, that the change from a predominantly spondaic rhythm to a predominantly dactylic one in this sequence is another indication, or reflection, of the same process, namely the change from measured statement to a less controlled emotional utterance.

These metrical observations suggest a refinement of the traditional interpretation of this particular sequence. It is a common observation that the poems become shorter as the formulation of the conflict becomes more precise; we may now add that the poems become more intense as the conflict becomes more acute. In other words, there is an emotional, as well as an intellectual, side to the process. Scholars have tended to emphasize the intellectual side—the attempt to analyse, to define, to formulate—and, though they have referred to the emotional conflict as underlying the situation, they have not generally seen it as reflected in the

⁶The difficulty of defining a clause for this purpose can be seen by examining 72.1–2 or 75.3–4. I have counted the former as two clauses and the latter as four.

⁷See above, note 2.

⁸Thus West (above, note 2) 102 concludes, "This feature is felt by Catullus to be particularly appropriate in passages where he is discussing some intense emotion of his own," and Ross (above, note 5) 119 refers to "the more realistic personal emotion which can be conveyed by excessive elision."

⁹Compare lines 1–8 of poem 76 with lines 9–16, and lines 17–22 with lines 23–26; and note Quinn's remark (in his commentary *ad loc.*): "In the first and third sections, feeling is kept under control, the syntax is flowing and elaborate; in the second and last sections, feeling threatens to get out of control and the syntax becomes jerky."

expression of the poems or noted any increase in emotion in the sequence as a whole. If they have observed the metrical developments, they have not generally used them for the interpretation, or appreciation, of the poetry.¹⁰

We can go on to apply the same line of argument to the poems as separate entities. Poems 72 and 75 naturally fall into two halves; poem 85 with its single couplet cannot be so divided, but is included in the following statistics for comparison. The numbers of dactyls per couplet in the various parts of these poems are:

72		75		85
1-4	5-8	1-2	3-4	1-2
1.0	2.5	4.0	4.0	4.0

The number increases in the second half of poem 72 but not of poem 75. But the number of elisions per couplet increases in both:

72		75		85
1-4	5-8	1-2	3-4	1-2
0.5	1.5	2.0	3.0	3.0

And the number of clauses per couplet also increases:

72		75		85
1-4	5-8	1-2	3-4	1-2
2.0	3.5	2.0	4.0	7.0

So it seems that the metrical developments observable in the sequence as a whole are repeated within the individual poems, and the natural conclusion would be that within the poems too there is some raising of the emotional level. Let us then briefly reconsider the separate poems.

It is clear enough that poem 72 falls into two halves. The first half describes Catullus' past love for Lesbia in the context of her protestations of loyalty, the second his present conflict of emotions now that he has

¹⁰The general tendencies of scholars may perhaps be illustrated by a series of comments taken from Quinn's commentary (above, note 2): "Poem 70 is the first of a series of fragments in which we see C(atullus) struggle to win more complete awareness of what went wrong between him and Lesbia by repeated, increasingly precise formulation in verse; cf. Poems 72, 75 and 85." (398); "These four patiently argued couplets [of poem 72] are remarkable no less for their clarity of insight than for their precise formulation of a lost ideal." (400). "Poem 72 ends, as it began, on a note of dispassionate logical analysis, yet leaves us in no doubt about the effort it costs C(atullus) to preserve his pose of icy detachment." (403)—and from his latest book (above, note 4): "The struggle . . . has been essentially a mental struggle." (107); "The poem [viz. 85] is remarkable for its utter simplicity, its dispassionate precision of statement, the icy detachment with which Catullus was able to put on paper an emotional conflict that affected him intensely." (108).

found her false. But again scholars have not on the whole marked any change in emotional level between the two halves or paid much attention to the metrical developments. Commager, for example, simply remarks of the poem as a whole, "The movement is stately and controlled . . . spondees are in high proportion," and, when Quinn says in his commentary, "Poem 72 ends, as it began, on a note of dispassionate logical analysis," he is implying that the emotional movement of the poem is static or circular rather than progressive.¹¹ Yet the three metrical features examined above strongly suggest that there is some emotional progression: the controlled and dignified description of the idealized past in the first half of the poem gives way to a rather less controlled expression of the realities of the present in the second half, with the dactylic movement of the last couplet suggestive of rising indignation rather than of dispassionate analysis. We may find confirmation of this interpretation in the increasingly forceful vocabulary of the second half of the poem (*impensius uxor . . . uilior et leuior . . . iniuria*), which similarly suggests a raising of the emotional level.

Poem 75, with its single long sentence and its carefully balanced clauses, gives the impression of being a carefully controlled statement ("ruthlessly clear-sighted," as Quinn calls it in his commentary). But we have to explain the high proportion of dactyls throughout and the increasing number of elisions and of short clauses in the second half, features which make it appear a poem of rapid movement rather than of measured utterance. And, even if these three metrical features could be discounted or explained away, there are three further ones which point in the same direction. One is the fact that neither of the hexameters has the usual 3S (penthemimeral) caesura: the effect of the run-on in these lines can only be to increase the rapidity of the poem. Another is the large number of short words in the third line, including four monosyllables and five disyllables: this produces a staccato effect suggestive of strong emotion.¹² And the third is the elision at the midpoint of the second pentameter: this elision, of a type almost entirely avoided by the Augustan elegists, again increases the speed of the poem by blurring the diaeresis, and moreover is a device used by Catullus elsewhere more than once to indicate emotional intensity.¹³ So there is a clear conflict between the control implied by the sentence structure of the poem and the force of emotion implied by the rhythm. It seems best to regard this as a tension deliberately created by the poet to imply that, in spite of the apparent detach-

¹¹S. Commager, *HSCP* 70 (1965) 94; Quinn, see above, note 10.

¹²The only other ten-word hexameters in Catullus' elegiac poetry are 68.159, 76.17, 89.5, and 112.1.

¹³Especially in 68.90, 73.6, 99.12, and 101.4. See M. O. Lee, *TAPA* 93 (1962) 150-152, and Ross (above, note 5) 123-128.

ment with which the situation is analysed, the poet's emotions are not very far below the surface. If so, this is a subtle and skilful use of metre and rhythm which has not received the recognition which it deserves.

Much the same may be said about poem 85, and the point need not be laboured. This is the poem where the numbers of dactyls, of elisions, and of short clauses are proportionately the greatest. On the surface we may have "dispassionate precision of statement" and "icy detachment"¹⁴ (though the word *excrucior* surely makes a forceful climax); but the metre and rhythm are used to imply the intensity of the feeling underneath.

This is clearly an approach which must be used with caution. The strongest impression that a poem makes is that conveyed by the words and by the emotional situation which they describe, and any interpretation of the metrical phenomena has to be tested very carefully against the content of the particular poem. But metrical considerations do, I believe, in the case of the three poems discussed offer some real refinements of our understanding.

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¹⁴See above, note 10.