

# **XVIII. Colonia and her Bridge: A Note on the Structure of Catullus 17**

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The poem's outer form is quite straightforward. In lines 1-11 Catullus asks permission to throw one of his acquaintances from the bridge of Colonia into the marsh beneath. Why? The answer is given in lines 12-22: the fellow is a laggard in love. The last four verses combine these two themes and so round off the poem. Looking a little closer we find evidence of a more detailed design. The first eleven verses fall into three parts. Lines 1-4 describe the town and its bridge, 5-7 mark a transition ("May you have a new bridge if my wish is fulfilled"), then 8-11 tell us what the wish is. So we are left with a symmetrical pattern of 4-3-4.

The second main division, i.e. lines 12-22, also reveals a pattern though not of a linear kind. The man is stupid (*insulsissimus* . . . *nec sapit*, 12), he is like a baby (12-13), he neglects his pretty wife (14-18), he is like a fallen tree (18-20), he is stupid (*stupor* . . . *nescit*, 21-22). So the chiasmus is arranged thus: stupid husband, simile, neglected wife, simile, stupid husband. If we focus our attention on the lady, we find out three things about her. She is in the prime of her beauty (14), she is more dainty than a kid (15), she is more tempting than ripe grapes (16). We also find out three things about her husband. He lets her play around to her heart's content, he doesn't care a straw, and he refuses to rouse himself (17-18).

The concluding lines combine the two themes already mentioned by taking up words, phrases and ideas from the main body of the poem. Thus *voragine* (26) echoes *vorago* (11), *nunc eum volo de tuo ponte mittere prouum* (23) harks back to *de tuo volo ponte* | *ire praecipitem* (11), *stolidum* (24) recalls *insulsissimus* (12) and *stupor* (21), and the mule in line 26 is not without significance. All this shows how an apparently simple poem can be a work of careful design and craftsmanship. Yet apart from a little elementary mathematics we haven't accomplished much. The problem of the

poem's inner structure still remains. I believe there is such a problem, but scholars have usually been so busy determining the site of Colonia that they have never bothered to formulate it.

Let me put it this way. A student beginning the piece assumes that he is to hear about a country town. By the time he has reached line five he realizes that the town's bridge is going to be just as important as the town itself. He is now more than a quarter of the way through the poem, his mind full of rustic gaiety, when it gradually dawns on him that Catullus is talking about something totally different, namely a lethargic gentleman of Verona. Now granted this fellow deserved to be taught a lesson. If we wish, we can imagine Catullus leaning over the bridge and gazing down on the slime beneath while thoughts of condign punishment pass through his mind. But why do we have to be told so much about the unsteady condition of the bridge? (A strong one would have suited Catullus's purpose just as well.) And why are we expected to take an interest in the town's enthusiasm for festive games, square dancing and other high jinks? These questions cannot be answered by the convenient phrase "local color." For in his *nugae* at least Catullus was not that kind of poet. If we want a solution which will preserve the poem as a coherent work of art, we must look elsewhere. And we must employ a method which, though not available to scholars like Friedrich, Baehrens and Ellis, is now a familiar feature of literary criticism.

As we read through the poem, we are struck by certain peculiarities. The first word we pause at is *inepta* (2). The editors, remembering that *ineptus* is the opposite of *aptus* and that *aptus* means "fitted" or "fitting," give the meaning as "loose."<sup>1</sup> And the Loeb translator renders the word, rather quaintly, as "ill-jointed." Well, the interpretation gives good sense, and etymologically it cannot be faulted. So let us accept it, leaving aside for the moment the fact that such a meaning is quite without parallel. The bridge's legs then are loose and shaky. But that is not all. There is something very strange about *crura*. Merrill tells us what it is. "The noun," he says, "is unique in this humorous application to inanimate objects, *pes* being commonly

<sup>1</sup> Ellis, following Munro, cites *quod multo maiorem habent apta vim quam soluta* (Cic. *Orat.* 68.228), *cum sint ex aptis dissoluta* (*ibid.* 70.233). He also mentions *aptissime cohaereant* (*ibid.* 44.149). Baehrens adds *De orat.* 2.4.17.

used in such connections.” In other words your legs are *crura*, but the legs of your chair are not.

Turning away from this oddly human bridge, we move on to the description of the lazy husband sleeping like an infant *tremula patris . . . in ulna* (13). This time we must differ from Merrill, for surely *tremulus* cannot refer to “the tremulousness of age.” Gentlemen of such advanced years are not usually the fathers of two-year-old infants, and even if they were, what would this contribute to the poet’s picture? Friedrich realized the irrelevance of such an interpretation, but he could only suggest that having written *tremulus parens* in 61.51 and *tremuli parentis* in 68.142 Catullus lost command of his pen and automatically used the same word here. Clearly Ellis and Kroll were right to abandon the idea of age and to take *tremula* in the sense of “rocking.” Yet it is significant that the only parallel which Ellis could provide from his vast store of learning was a passage of Plato, where *seîô* is used in the same way.<sup>2</sup>

Our last pause occurs at line 19 where the alder tree is said to have been hamstrung—*supernata*—by an axe. It is a vivid, indeed a unique phrase, and it is clearly related to the less decorous of the two meanings of *se sublevat* in the previous line. Loose legs, unsteady arms, severed hams, nerveless members—they are all connected, and they provide a direct contrast to the idea of strong, vigorous legs implied in *salire paratum habes* (2) and in *Salisubsali sacra* (6).

All this may appear rather fanciful. But is it really? What we are trying to do is to establish a relation between the bridge and the lazy husband. And, as it happens, there is more evidence than this. Let us go back to the beginning. The bridge’s legs are so rickety that it is in danger of falling on its back (*supinus*) and wallowing in the mud (*recumbat*). This anticipates the description of Catullus’s fellow-townsmen, who is like a sleeping baby (*dormientis*), who refuses to stand up (*nec se sublevat*), and who resembles a tree lying in a ditch (*iacet*). The poet hopes that the treatment proposed will rouse him (*excitare veternum*), and that he will leave behind in the mud his indolent character (*supinum animum*). The reference to the man’s *supinus animum* reminds us that he is a silly dolt (*insulsissimus, stupor* etc.); and the bridge is

<sup>2</sup> *Laws* 790. It will be found, however, that *seiousai* receives a lot of help from its context.

silly too. In spite of what the editors tell us we cannot ignore the usual, and indeed the only attested meaning of *ineptus*.<sup>3</sup> As Gertrude Stein would have said, "Stupid is stupid is stupid." Furthermore there is no mistaking the tone of ridicule in the phrase *ponticuli axulis stantis in redivivis*, "the crazy bridge standing on its resurrected sticks." So much for the first of the poem's two main structural features.

We now turn to Colonia itself—or rather herself, for the town is obviously personified. Unlike her shaky bridge she is full of vitality and is eager to hold a festival. When one thinks of the dancing, the drinking, the laughter and the flirting entailed by religious celebrations of this kind, it is easy to see why *ludere* rather than *orare* was the proper word to use. And it is noticeable that the other words describing Colonia's enthusiasm are not wholly innocent: *cupis* . . . *salire* . . . *libidine*. By all means let us translate them as "want," "dance" and "wish," but the naughty overtones of the Latin cannot be silenced.

All this of course foreshadows the young wife. She is, we are told, *delicior haedo*. The phrase is not a simple one. The images of flowers and grapes which precede and follow it show that *delicior* refers primarily to the girl's seductive appearance, not to her temperament and behavior. To this extent Friedrich and Merrill are wrong, and Kroll's brief comment "rein körperlich," "purely physical," is justified. On the other hand when we read the poem over again, it is hard not to supply the secondary meaning of *delicatus* as well, i.e. "wanton," and to take it as a preparation for *ludere ut lubet* in line 17. Unfortunately for the translator there is no English word which holds the two meanings in solution.

Whatever may be felt about the last point, there can be no doubt concerning the implications of *ludere hanc sinit ut lubet*. I say "implications" rather than "sense," because I do not think that Catullus is being quite so blunt as in 61.204, a passage which Kroll cites as a parallel. There *ludite ut lubet* is followed by the unvarnished injunction *et brevi liberos date*, whereas the present context seems to suggest a flirt in danger rather than a habitual libertine. The young wife "amuses herself" with the local lads, laughing, dancing, drinking and kissing, in fact doing all the things that Colonia wants to do. This is of course a lamentable state of affairs, and Catullus has no doubt where the blame lies.

<sup>3</sup> *Ineptus* itself does not appear in any of the passages referred to in note 1.

It is because of the husband's inadequacy that the girl amuses herself elsewhere, just as Colonia's frustration is due to the inadequacy of her bridge.

I hope this analysis has shown that the poem is a single, integrated structure. Perhaps, however, a word may be added about the bog. There it lies, waiting for the collapse of the bridge, waiting for the fall of the husband.<sup>4</sup> At first the punishment seems purely retributive. The fellow is a silly ass and deserves to be hurled head first into the deepest, blackest and most stinking part of the bog. It is an appropriate penalty for a sluggard since mud has always been associated with dull insensitivity. But at line 24 the poet's plan takes on a new quality. Far from being an impulse of mere exasperation, it aims, we are told, at a wholesome and therapeutic effect. This is confirmed by a passage of Celsus (3.20) which recommends that lethargic patients should be awakened up by offensive odors and by sudden cold showers. Later (4.27) the same treatment is prescribed for a woman in a coma.<sup>5</sup> And yet on closer inspection something appears to be wrong. The smells enumerated by Celsus include those of burning pitch, a smoldering lamp wick, vinegar, garlic, and onions, not quite of the same order as the foul stench of a marsh. Nor are showers of cool water exactly comparable to immersion in a stagnant bog. In fact the element of filth, which is most emphasized by the poet, is entirely absent from Celsus. So it looks as if Catullus as a physician is not entirely within the tradition of Hippocrates.

But if his methods seem unorthodox and his manner a little disconcerting, there can be no doubt that his aim is a salutary one. So much is clear from the poem's conclusion, and this in turn echoes the optimistic note in line 5. Eventually, one hopes, the old bridge will be replaced or at least thoroughly repaired, so that Colonia may attain her wishes. So too the lively young wife will receive from the slime a husband who is a new man, a man of spirit, yet of the earth earthy.

<sup>4</sup> A corresponding part is played by *fossa* in line 19.

<sup>5</sup> Like Catullus, Celsus uses the word *excitare* in both passages; in the former he uses *repente* as well. Cf. also Pliny, *NH* 19.155 where *nasturtium* is said to be a kind of cress which shakes off lethargy (*torporem excitantis*), and *ibid.* 30.11 where we are told that *lethargus olfactorius excitatur*.