

Poetic Uses of Structure and Meter in Catullus' 108, 51, and 23

Catullus' poetry has a bold and bombastic quality to it, characterized by its in-your-face and altogether believably real emotion seeping out of every line. However, the relatability of Catullus' oeuvre is also its silent discredit and detriment because it discourages the reader from examining the poetry more closely; when looking at a placid pool, one believes oneself to see to the bottom, and therefore there is no need to take a dive. But Catullus' poetry has hidden depths which are only revealed by taking the proverbial plunge and carefully analyzing every inch of the poems, or rather, every metrical foot. While the diction of his work has been considered by other noteworthy and laudable scholars on the subject, his poetic structure and meter is less appreciated. Fitting into the works of Cowan, Garrison, and Greene, this paper will focus on the usage of the structure of a poem, and a few instances of meter, to impart further meaning to the poem, using Cowan's considerations of poem 108 as a model to better understand Catullus' poetic adaptation of Sappho and the dissolution of self in poem 51 as well as his dissection of how poverty impacts Furius and his family in poem 23.

Carmen 108 is a decidedly mean-spirited poem, being a cruel wish for the abuse and dissolution of the body of a hated individual, Cominius, such that his limbs and appendages be ripped asunder. More than words, Catullus uses the lines themselves as a means by which to tear Cominius apart, as he is reduced line by line into something less than the sum of its parts, a disheveled pile of feasted-upon flesh. This consideration of poem 108 will differ from previous scholarship like that of Cowan in that I will argue that the meter itself adds to the poem as well, as elisions in line four mirror the cutting out of Cominius' tongue in a grisly situational pun, and short and long syllables belie rapid animalistic consumption of the flesh. Additionally, while

Cowan considers this to be an isolated incident regarding structural usage (Cowan 2021), I see it as merely the most evident example of such, and I argue for the further consideration of the meter as having poetic use.

Furthermore, poem 51 is an additional example of the poetic structure adding meaning to the poem. The structure of the poem in Sapphic stanza signposts to the reader that the poem is influenced by Sappho, and that signposting adds weight to it by pointing to its connection to a famous figure. This remains true when one considers that the meter itself is Sapphic stanza. Also, the poem's structure in stanzas makes it segmented and furthers each stanza's meaning. It sets apart the male competitive lover, Lesbia (the thief of perception), Catullus' physical reactions towards Lesbia and encapsulates his dissolution, while the break between stanzas three and four gives enough space for Catullus to then introduce to the previously dissolved version of himself a method by which to avoid such problems in the future. This paper will add to previous scholarly work on the subject of poem 51 (e.g., Greene) by considering the spacing out of the stanzas as a specific choice by Catullus to not only signal to his audience the direct connection the poem has to its inspiration, Sappho, but also to emphasize the isolated aspect of his love for Lesbia, and how it affects his person; how and why he separates himself from her in the structure of the poem.

Additionally, following the model of poem 108, this paper investigates the dissection included in poem 23, as Catullus breaks down his acquaintance Furius through tongue-in-cheek jabs at his financial status and how that status is affecting the bodies of both Furius and his family members, setting apart teeth, digestion, sweat, and the posterior. A parallel can be formed between poem 108 and 23 as body parts are considered apart from the whole, thus tearing apart the subject of the poems line by line. This paper will add to previous scholarly work on poem 23

(e.g., Garrison) by introducing the possibility of Furius' family eating stones (Catull. 23.4) being a reference not only to their health, but to their wealth as well, with it being an indicator of poverty-induced geophagia (Woywodt 2002).

Bibliography

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