THE REFRAIN IN THE SONG OF THE FATES IN CATULLUS C. 64 (v. 323—381)

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The Fates sing a strange song as an epithalamium in Catullus' poem on the marriage of Peleus and Thetis. Ellis\(^1\) refers to this song as the most finished part of the poem. Certainly many excellences are yielded to study.

I wished here only to record some observations on Catullus' use of refrain in this song but as the refrain's significance is derived from the singers, I must refer briefly to the traditional accounts of the marriage of Peleus and Thetis and to tradition in marriage songs\(^2\).

Traditional accounts of the marriage describe variously Apollo present with his lyre, Chiron prophesying, and the Muses singing\(^3\). The Parcae are included among the wedding guests, but as singers of the marriage song they appear for the first time in Catullus' poem. They have the appearance that they have in Greek tradition\(^4\), for they are old and white-haired, and robed in white, and they ceaselessly weave destiny. Catullus does not give each her special function in the spinning, the measuring, and the cutting of the thread that represents individual life. All spin the threads of inescapable destiny foretold in song:

'carmine, perfidiae quod post nulla arguer aetas' (322).

Catullus could count on the learning of his readers and on the pleasure they would find in the contrast\(^5\) between what they expected — the Muses — and what he presented — three old women in white garments bordered with glowing colour, with crimson fillets in their white hair, working with the spindles, nipping threads from the wool with their teeth, the wool clinging to wrinkled dry lips — a picture made the more arresting by the startling monosyllable\(^6\) at the end of verse 315:

'atque ita decerpens aequabat semper opus dens,'

and by a Catullan tenderness, seen in the diminutives aridulis and labellis, even in description of the awful Fates.

The song suggests various traditional features of the marriage ceremony: the

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5. See also Klingner, op. cit., p. 23: 'So sieht man die singenden Göttinnen nicht idealisiert in die Ferne gerückt, sondern aus nächster Nähe recht als alte Frauen, wie man sie im Alltag sehen konnte. Um so stärker wird der Gegensatz zu dem schönen Chor der Musen.'
6. Cf. Catullus 68. 19; 5. 5; 7. 5.
feast, the deductio and the arrival of the bride, the escorting of bride and groom to the thalamos, the jesting, the singing of the epithalamium. The songs of the deductio are recalled in the Fates' praises of the groom and of happiness, and the traditional epithalamium in their references to the evening star and to the coming of the bride and, with her, sensuous delight. From praise of the love and union of Peleus and Thetis arises the story of Achilles (338–371). Reference to the birth of a child, here prophesied, not merely hoped for, is a feature of the epithalamium, as is a certain sensuousness, here derived from particular words: flexanimo (330); languidulos (331) — 'the soft languor of sleep' (Ellis); context (334) — 'shut in from prying eyes' (Ellis, who comments on the suggestion of the closed door of the thalamos); the frequently repeated amor (330, 334, 335, 372); the reiteration in coniuinx (329), coniungere (331), coniunxit (325); and the special quality of concordia (336).

If the refrain is retained as v. 378, the song is divided into 12 strophes by means of the recurring line. The structure of the whole may be represented as: a, b, a. The first three and the last three strophes, a, deal in a conventional way with the marriage; the intervening verses, b, are a digression from the main theme, for they evoke the saga of the Trojan War. Catullus has thus re-created in miniature what he created in the epyllion itself, for here, too, is a tale within a tale, the theme of the inner tale at variance with that of the frame yet subtly connected with it, and the whole of symmetrical structure.

Catullus pays a compliment to Theocritus by using a refrain having both the rhythm and the irregular occurrence of the refrain of Idyll 1. The recurring verse serves to show that in spite of epic metre this is a song, and it repeatedly brings our thoughts back to the revolving spindles; their ceaseless movement recalls, in turn, the restless movement, like that of waves on a shore, of the Nereids, who traditionally danced at the wedding.

In Catullus' song of the Fates we are constantly delighted by the skilful use of the refrain which comes, it would seem, of its own accord to let us pause to consider, to acquiesce, to reject.

In its first use (v. 327) the refrain is the logical and syntactical conclusion of a sentence:

'... sed vos, quae fata sequuntur,
currite ducentes subtegmina, currite, fusi.'

We must then consider it a postpositive refrain throughout. After this first use it no longer has explicit meaning; instead it is great with unexpressed meaning which is able to carry thought beyond the expressed meaning of each strophe. That this refrain:

'currite ducentes subtegmina, currite, fusi,'

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7 See Ellis Catulli Veronensis Liber, pp. 258—260, for comment on transpositions of the intercalary verse.
8 The story of betrayed Ariadne is set in the frame of the marriage of Peleus and Thetis. The structure of the poem may be set out as: a, b, c, d, e, d, c, b, a.
9 Idyll 1. 70: ἀρχετε βουκολικαίς, Μολώις φίλαι, ἀρχετε ἴδιοίς.
See Wilamowitz, op. cit., pp. 301, 303.
10 This is the purpose of the refrain in Idyll 1 also: 'a device for suggesting in epic verse the structure of sung verse' — Gow, op. cit. Vol. II, p. 16, commenting on Wilamowitz' examination of efforts to find strophic responsories in the poem.

87
may be so significantly detached from its context shows the excellence of its composition.

The refrain's significance beyond its own meaning is subtly derived both from the singers and their occupation and from its own sound and rhythm. The singers are the Fates, and what they sing must be; their occupation, to which the refrain constantly recalls us, is homely and temporal yet holds in itself eternity. The rhythm — the light rolling of currite and subtegmina, and the smooth stretching of ducentes and fusi — conveys the idea of the work with the spindles, and the confining of the vowels to the less emotional e, i, u has resulted in a protean quality which makes it possible for the words to ring, as the refrains of the traditional ballads of later civilisations do, either as confirmation of, or as contrast to, the theme of each strophe.

Because it is both so full of meaning and so without meaning, the refrain has a quality of universality; it adapts itself to each strophe, and may be heard in the mind as the expression of a variety of emotions. In v. 326 it is a joyous accompaniment to the noble address to Peleus. Its tone is mellow and its pace lingering (333) after the languid, sensuous description of anticipated delight. The next three verses deal not with the future but with the present love of Peleus and Thetis. The Fates have paused in their prophesying to contemplate this happiness; with the next refrain (337) they recall themselves to their task. In 342 the refrain is an exultant accompaniment to the swiftness and fearlessness of Achilles. Its sound is foreboding in 347, for it echoes the gathering sounds of war that swell to expression in vastabip:

‘periuri Pelopis vastabit tertius heres’ (346).

The grief of aged mothers, expressed in the beating of the breast, is heard in the plosive sounds and in the rhythm of:

‘putridaque infirmis variabunt pectora palmis’ (351),
a rhythm to which our refrain comes in subtle contrast, interrupting the sequence of thought, for the cause of the grief is to be found in the next strophe. Here the Fates pause in their prophecy to contemplate a common pastoral scene — a mower at work in the hot sunshine among the yellowing corn. He swings his scythe lightly in the succeeding refrain (356), but the lines that describe the cutting down of the corn and of the Trojan youth have three heavy strokes in succession, emphasized by identical rhythm and repeated r:

‘...praercepens messor aristas’ (353),
‘...prosternet corpora ferro’ (355).

In 361 the refrain provides relief to the pictures raised in the mind by each line of the preceding strophe, pictures to which each rhythm contributes. We begin quite normally with a verse that has the familiar beat of our refrain:

‘testis erit magnis virtutibus unda Scamandri’,

but in the succeeding descriptions the rhythm of each line draws attention to the terrible nature of the substance, seen in the metaphors angustans and tepe-faciët, for we have in one of these verses (358) the unusual and sought spondaic ending of four syllables in one proper name and, in contrast, at the end of the

11 a and o are strongly associated with feelings — wonder, astonishment, pain, warmth of affection. Dr. van Gelder notices Catullus' limitation of sound to the lighter vowels in a verse of C. 8, and writes of it: 'Dit geraffineerde vers (ê ê ë ë ë ê) 'Fulsere vere candidi tibi soles' (8. 8)'. De woordverhaling bij Catullus, Den Haag 1933, p. 100.
next verse six syllables with an elision, while in 360 the syllables of *tepefaciet* are given an abnormal quantity and emphasis.

Verses 362, 363 and 364 prepare us by means of general statements for what is to follow, and the refrain (365) provides a necessary pause. It is the crown of the song that follows — the appropriation by Catullus of the significance of a scene of Euripides in this presentation of Polyxena. These five verses have as their keynote the word *madefient*. Verse 368:

'alta Polyxenia madefient caede sepulcra',

itself builds up to *madefient*, communicating in its word order what is otherwise incommunicable. Pictures rise successively in the mind to make us aware of an elevation as yet without outline, of all the associations of the name Polyxena, and of a moistening as yet unexplained. Only now do we see the whole immolation at the tomb. Catullus has condemned the slaughter in the very manner of the description. The verse holds in its word order what a modern poet strives to express by letting two voices speak at the same time — the criticism of a situation (here 'Polyxenia caede') that is inherent in the fact (here 'alta madefient sepulcra').

Ellis in his commentary points out the harshness of elisions in this, the most finished part of the poem. We must conclude that the harshness is deliberately contrived to emphasize the nature of the slaughter and especially that of the last 'most terrible attestation' to Achilles' greatness. *Two, coacervatum aggere* and *copiam Achivis*, occur in the description of Polyxena's immolation, and one, *corporum acervis*, in the description of the choked river made warm with the blood of the slain.

We recall Hecuba's mourning for Polyxena:

*νυμην τ' ἐνυμον, παρθένον τ' ἀπάρθενον* (Hec. 612)

in the plangence of the refrain when it interrupts (365) and when it puts an end to (371) the description of the immolation. This recollection, followed as it is by the immediate transference of interest to the marriage feast, sets Polyxena before us as a bride in a strange form of marriage. By employing the associations of Euripides' words Catullus has given his picture of Polyxena a significance greater than itself.

When the song brings us back to the festivities abruptly as if no more is to be endured, it becomes wilder, with something of a fescennine quality, and the refrain, coming at shorter intervals (375, 378, 381), reflects this too.

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12 E. K. Rand says of Vergil's borrowings from Catullus what is fitting here also: that he 'appropriates the pathos of an entire scene... for an impressive moment in his own narrative'. *Catullus and the Augustans*, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, XVII (1906) p. 25.

13 See C. G. Cooper *An Introduction to the Latin Hexameter*, Melbourne 1952, p. 44, for an illuminating analysis of the dramatic effect of the golden line.

In v. 129 we see the same ability to convey by word order more than words alone convey:

'mollia nudatae tollentem tegmina surae'

spoke to the Roman of a softness, a bareness, a lifting, and so presented the picture of Ariadne as sensuously and as adroitly as only a film director can do today.
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