CATULLUS 84: *IN VINO VERITAS?*

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Chommoda dicebat, si quando commoda vellet
dicere, et insidias Arrius hinsidias,
et tum mirifice sperabat se esse locutum,
cum quantum poterat dixerat hinsidias.
credo, sic mater, sic liber avunculus eius,
sic maternus avus dixerat atque avia.
hoc misso in Syriam requierant omnibus aures:
audibant eadem haec leniter et leviter,
nec sibi postilla metuebant talia verba,
cum subito affertur nuntius horribilis:
Ionios fluctus, postquam illuc Arrius isset,
iam non Ionios esse sed Hionios.

THE STANDARD INTERPRETATION of this popular epigram of Catullus is that it lampoons a fatuous parvenu who apparently attempts to ape the cultivated diction of the Hellenized Roman aristocracy by inserting aspirations into words where they do not belong.[1] C. J. Fordyce (1961: 373) thinks that this is all there is to the joke, but other critics suspect that there is more. A. J. Bell (1915), for example, long ago asked: "What is an epigram without a point? and surely the point of an epigram should come at the end of it? So the point of this epigram must be in the word *Hionios*." Likewise E. Harrison (1915) noted: "The trouble about the poem is that it has all the look of rising to a climax, yet falls miserably flat." As a remedy, he suggests that the last word of the poem contains a bilingual pun on the word χιονέους (= "snowy"). He explains: "When Arrius crossed [the Ionian], his aspirates blew up a blizzard, and the sea has been snow-swept ever since."[2] To date, no one has yet offered any other better gloss.

But does "snowy" really fit the bill as a satisfactory punch line? There are, after all, no hints leading up to it, and a snowy Ionian sea seems far-fetched even as a joke, unless we agree with D. M. Jones (1956) that the jest lies in the dual applicability of the same terms (*levis*, *lenis*, *asper*, *spiritus*) to both weather and speech. But perhaps there is a more convincing alternative, and one which is better anticipated in the course of the poem. I believe there are clues which point to an entirely different pun on *Hionios*.

First, we notice that Catullus has named his victim. We are not dealing here with just any anonymous Roman cockney, but a particular individual whom

[1] The phenomenon is noted at Cic. *Orat.* 160; Quint. 1.5.19–21 (who even alludes to this poem); Aul. Gell. 13.6.3.

[2] This explanation has since been slightly elaborated by Einarson (1966), and endorsed by Quinn (1970: 421). Fordyce (1961: 377), however, found it unlikely.

PHOENIX, VOL. 52 (1998) 3–4.

the poet has explicitly identified. Catullus is not so much mocking a generic class of pretentious social climbers but a specific person, someone familiar to his immediate audience. The sting of the lampoon is thus sharpened by being directed at a recognizable individual.[3] Accordingly, with all due caution against reading in too much biographical material from outside the text, we are justified in asking who this Arrius might be.

The historical record admits of some controversy, but prosopographers have now reached a fairly unanimous consensus, and one which happily coincides with the data of this poem.[4] Cicero speaks of a Q. Arrius who, though low-born and ill-educated, was notorious as a long-winded orator who attained a praetorship and considerable wealth in the course of a long career as an ambitious satellite of Crassus (*Brutus* 242–243). In 72 B.C. he fought (unsuccessfully) against Spartacus in the slave revolt eventually crushed by Crassus (Livy *Per.* 96), and he turns up again later as a loyal client of Crassus during the First Triumvirate, hoping (in vain) to be rewarded with a consulship in 58 B.C.[5] And so it seems likely that it was again with Crassus in 55 B.C. that he travelled to Syria on the mission alluded to by Catullus in line 7 which gave such a welcome rest to the weary ears of his usual audience back in Rome. All this is standard material in the commentaries, but one additional significant item which is typically ignored[6] is the testimony of Horace (*Sat.* 2.3.86 and 243–246), who satirizes Arrius and his sons as infamous gourmands. Cicero too mentions a conspicuously enormous funeral feast which Arrius hosted in 59 B.C. during his unsuccessful bid for a consulship.[7]

Next, what are we to make of the odd third couplet of the poem, and especially the word *liber* in line 5? Textual critics once tried to emend *liber* into some regionally distinctive proper name such as *Cimber* or *Umber* in support of theories that Arrius' excessive aspirations were a dialectical characteristic of his supposed Etruscan or Venetic origins.[8] Most modern commentators, however, agree that *liber* probably does not denote the name of Arrius' uncle, but instead is intended

[3] Quinn (1970: 419) comments: "To be worthy of an epigram, Arrius should be more than an innocent, if over-zealous, semi-literate. He might of course be a personal enemy, but the lines offer no evidence of that." For a broad discussion of *nominatim* invective technique, see LaFleur 1981.

[4] The problem is thoroughly considered and documented by Marshall and Baker (1975), in harmony with the brief discussion by Sumner (1973: 130).

[5] Baker and Marshall (1978: 49–50) suggest that it may have been this tiresome orator's too frequent public mention of this "ambush" of his expectation of political "advantages" (the result of the marginalization of his patron Crassus by the other two Triumvirs) that explains Catullus' particular choice of the rhetorical catchphrases *insidias* and *commoda*.

[6] It is noticed, however, by Neudling (1955: 9).

[7] Cic. *Vat.* 30–31; *Att.* 2.5.2 and 2.7.3; discussed by Marshall and Baker (1975: 226–228). Ramage (1959) believes that the Q. Arrius mentioned by Cicero in 59 B.C. (*Att.* 2.14.2 and 2.15.3) as an irksome neighbor at Formiae and described as *perurbanus* (translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey as "hyper-sophisticate") may also refer to the Arrius of Catullus 84.

[8] References cited by Neudling (1955: 10, n. 3). More recently, Nisbet (1978: 110) suggested emending the word to *semper*.

as a satiric innuendo against the low social status of his family: by pointing out that this uncle was free-born, Catullus implies that other kinsmen were servile. And in fact this interpretation is buttressed by the testimony of Cicero (*Brut.* 243) that Q. Arrius was *infimo loco natus.*

While this reading of *liber* is possible, there is perhaps a better alternative. As Neudling points out: "*Liber* is more probably a nickname based upon the other name of Bacchus and referring to the family taste for wine: both Q. Arrius and his sons were notorious banqueters."[9] Given Catullus' propensity for punning,[10] especially on proper names, this hypothesis is entirely plausible, especially if it can be substantiated by other clues in the poem that Arrius and his family were known as heavy drinkers. (There is extra irony in the application of the bacchanalian epithet to the uncle, who in Latin literature is proverbially a stern, censorious figure; for example, in Catullus 74.) And in fact there seems to be a corroborating pun just before this in line 4 where the verb *poterat* suggests a syncopated form of the verb *potaverat.*[11] This section would then read:

and then he fancied he 'ad spoken so splendidly
when he 'ad said "h-ambushes" *as mush as he could.*
[= after he 'ad been drinking so mush.]
Thus I believe his mother spoke, thus his old Uncle Bacchus,
and thus had his mother's father and mother before.

Multiple sound effects in the Latin contribute to the comically bibulous tone suggested in the translation above: the cluster of sibilants in line 3 and especially the slurred elision of *se esse*; the stuttering jingles in *loCutUM/ CUM QUantUM* and *potERAT dixERAT* (4) and *dixerAT ATque* (6); and the triple hiccup effect of *sic . . . sic . . . sic.* Likewise in the last couplet of the poem, with its stuttering triple repetition of the word *Ionios*, there comes another great rush of sibilants (including two sets of double s) and an elision which all contribute a slushy sound and drunken effect to the punch line. In fact, the unusually high frequency of the letter s throughout the poem (which ancient grammarians describe simply as a hiss), provides a constant counterpart to the variant hissing sound produced by

[9] Neudling 1955: 11. Though skeptical of the identification of the Arrius in Catullus with the banqueting family mocked by Horace, the possibility of a pun here on Bacchus is repeated by Levin (1973: 593). Neither Neudling nor Levin, however, makes any attempt to relate this alleged pun to the rest of the poem. But Baker and Marshall (1977: 292–293), firmly rejecting the old idea that Catullus' use of *liber* could possibly be interpreted as implying a servile background for such a high-ranking *praetorius* as Arrius, advance the *Liber=Bacchus* theory significantly; they suggest that the lavish funeral *epulum* mentioned by Cicero and Horace was given by Arrius not in honor of his father (as usually assumed, but without evidence) but rather in honor of his uncle, who presumably shared the family's reputation as party-givers.

[10] In this poem, for example, commentators typically suggest that there is a pun on *aures* (= *aurae*) in line 7, on *leviter* (= "lightly" and "without aspiration") in line 8, and on *horribilis* (= "terrible" and "rough/aspirated") in line 10.

[11] There is a similar pun in Mart. 1.26.2: *aqua totiens ebrius esse potes.*

the initial h of aspirated words.[12] Perhaps then the joke of this whole lampoon springs from the reputation of Arrius as a wine-guzzler. And perhaps it is his overindulgence in the fruit of the vine rather than his social pretentiousness which accounts for the conspicuous hissing of his aspirated speech.[13]

To return now to the original object of this investigation, the final test of the theory of Arrius' alleged dipsomania as a cause of his rough enunciation would be to find it supported in the *coup de grâce* at the end of the epigram. First, let us note that the key word *Ionios*, which Catullus chose in preference to any other geographical designation he might easily have used, is conspicuously similar in sound to the Greek word for wine, οἶνος. Second, we must remember that in the manuscripts the transmitted text of the last word of the poem is simply *Ionios*; the addition of the initial aspirate is a Renaissance emendation (as are the other superfluous aspirations now universally printed at the beginning of the poem).[14] As observed earlier, the simple addition of an *h* to *Ionios*, while certainly on the right track, nevertheless leaves the epigram with a disappointingly flat ending. Merely a third, random example of a false aspiration is not a satisfying conclusion to this piece. We expect a grand finale here, and a howling pun would be just the thing, especially if it had been properly prepared by hints given before.

The old suggestion of inferring an initial aspirated guttural to give a pun on χιονέους points in the right direction. After all, the poem begins with a misplaced Greek χ-sound in *chommoda*, and it may have been Catullus' intention to finish with a matching solecism at the end. But since the resulting word

[12] Vandiver (1990) draws attention both to the frequency throughout this poem of the letter s and to the way it is carefully patterned against the aspirations. She notes especially the symmetry of the three key words (*hinsidias*, *horribilis*, and *Hionios*): they are all four syllables long, they all take a prominent position at the ends of the first two and last two pentameters, and they all begin with an aspiration and end with an s.

[13] As we would expect, a heavy use of elision and alliteration (especially of the letters h and s) is common in other passages where drunken speech is reproduced. For example, Plautus gives Pseudolus this monologue when he staggers on stage after celebrating his victory (*Pseud.* 1246–58):

quid hoc*? sicine* hoc *fit, pedes? statin an non?*
an id voltis ut me hinc *iacentem aliquis tollat?*
nam hercule *is cecidero, vostrum erit flagitium.*
pergitin pergere? ah*! saeviendum mi* hodie *est;*
magnum hoc *vitium vino est:*
pedes captat primum, luctator dolosust.
perfecto edepol ego nunc probe habeo *madulsam:*
ita victu excurato, ita magnis munditiis divis dignis,
itaque in loco festivo sumus festive accepti.
quid opust me multas agere ambages? hoc *est* homini
quam ob rem vitam amet,
hic *omnes voluptates, in* hoc *omnes venustates*
sunt: deis proxumum esse arbitror.

There are similar drunken sound effects in Plaut. *Cist.* 120–148, *Curc.* 96–157, *Most.* 313–347; Ter. *Eun.* 727–770, *Ad.* 763–787; Petr. *Sat.* 34; Mart. 10.20.19, 1.27.

[14] For a discussion, see Rosén 1961: 224–232.

Chionios (if spelled with a *C*) would technically violate the meter,[15] Catullus probably spelled the last word *Hionios* (without the *C*), while intending that it be pronounced gutturally like a Greek χ.[16] But instead of the meaning "snowy" as the double-entendre in *(C)hionios*, I suggest a play on "Chian," referring to the celebrated wine produced on the Ionian island of Chios. The plausibility of such a neologism mixing the words "Chian" and "Ionian" is strengthened if we recall that the ancients often mixed their wine with sea water.[17] The pun becomes unmistakable in light of the remarkable information from Pliny the Elder (*NH* 14.9.73) that there was actually a particularly prized variety of Chian wine called "Ariusian."

This double pun is too much of a coincidence to be unintentional.[18] It gives the lampoon the uproarious ending it needs, and is in full harmony with the rest of the poem and with the historical record. To Catullus and his contemporaries, Arrius would have been known as a windy orator, a failure on the battlefield, an ostentatious epicure, and an ambitious, uncouth creature of Crassus, by whom he was abandoned during his run for the consulship of 58 B.C. Accordingly, Catullus satirizes him here as a ridiculous "nephew of Bacchus," endlessly haranguing Rome with pretentious and possibly inebriated aspirates. Furthermore, the key words

[15] The metrical objection was noted at Harrison (1915: 199) when he first proposed χιονέους. In rebuttal, he suggested that by the time of Catullus, the Greek pronunciation of χ may have been indistinguishable to a Roman from their own letter h—or near enough to cancel any pedantic metrical quibble over what is, after all, only a joke.

[16] Defending Harrison's χιονέους theory, Einarson (1966: 188) writes: "*Ch* for *c* in *c(h)ommoda* and *hi* for *i* in *(h)insidias* prepare us for *Ch* for *I* in the finishing thrust *Hionios* (= Χιονέους); as the preceding syllable remains short we must suppose that the *H* represents a guttural spirant, which could be understood as χ and written as *h*." As an orthographical analogy, Einarson cites the fact that the Hebrew letter cheth is found transcribed by χ in Greek (as in Χαρράν and Χωρήβ, to take two geographical examples) but by h in Latin (*Haran* and *Horeb*). Though not exactly parallel but exploiting the same ambiguity in pronunciation, Cicero (*de Orat.* 2.249) records a witticism apparently arising from a pun based on a strongly aspirated initial *c*, so that the verb *circumveniri* was pronounced in a way to suggest *hircum-veniri*.

[17] Horace, for example, satirizes a banquet where the host ostentatiously served his guests Chian wine unmixed with sea water: *Chium maris expers* (*Sat.* 2.8.15; cf. Athen. 1.8: οὐ τεθαλασσωμένον). Pliny remarks that wine imported from Clazomenae became more popular when flavored less with sea water, and remarks that the wine of Lesbos tastes of the sea naturally (*NH* 14.73–74). Columella (12.21.4) prescribes the proper amounts of brine to add to wine. See also Plaut. *Rud.* 588.

[18] There may even be a triple pun here, suggested by Poem 27 (the only poem by Catullus specifically about drinking) which complements my interpretation. In this short sympotic song the speaker calls for a cup of strong wine undiluted with water (the adjective employed in line 2, *amariores*, looks like a playful pun on the idea of *a mari* = "free from sea-water"). The poem concludes *hic merus est Thyonianus*, the last word being a coinage based on a rare epithet of Bacchus (*Thyoneus*) whose mother Semele was sometimes called Thyone. Similarly, in the conclusion of Poem 84, the dental sound at the end of *sed* combined with the aspirate at the beginning of *Hionios* comes close to producing something very like *Thyonios*. This unusual title of Bacchus would of course tie in with the epithet *Liber* in line 5, and with the reference to Liber's parents in line 6 (i.e., to Jupiter and Semele, if Liber = Bacchus). We should also note that Poem 27 offers the suprise of a *female* symposiarch, which may somehow be relevant to the mysterious emphasis in Poem 84 on the maternal side of Arrius' family.

"advantages" and "ambushes" which open the poem are suggestive of Crassus with whom Arrius seems to have travelled to Syria, whence he eventually returned across an Ionian sea which, on his lips, was indistinguishable from a flood of the Ariusian variety of "Chionian" wine.

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