XIX. Simaetha's Incantation: Structure and Imagery

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Among the favorite activities of nineteenth century Theocritean scholarship was the study of "strophic responsion" in the idylls. A number of critics assumed that Theocritus modelled the structure of his hexameter idylls on that of choral lyric poetry: they accordingly divided Theocritus' idylls into strophes which would "respond" one to another (as do strophe, antistrophe, and epode in lyric poetry) and create well-rounded, symmetrical patterns.[1] Such a method of analysis has come under criticism as being overly artificial and mechanical, and critics have demanded that studies of structure in Theocritus be based on more strictly literary or poetic considerations, such as units of thought or sense (which often do not correspond to the arbitrary strophes of the earlier critics), rhetorical patterns, or imagery.[2] It is, however, evident even from a casual reading that Theocritus often composes in short groups of lines or in units which may be labeled "strophes." The most obvious examples occur in the first two idylls where refrains clearly divide the songs into a certain "strophe" pattern, but "strophes" not so separated are used elsewhere, and especially in the songs of *Idyll* 10. These songs consist almost completely of end-stopped couplets, units which we may describe as two-line "strophes." In Bucaeus' song (10.24–37) these "strophes" are arranged to form a symmetrical pattern: three single couplets (24–25, 30–31, 36–37) surround two groups of two couplets each (26–29, 32–35). The pattern is thus 1:2:1:2:1, and this stichical pattern enhances the articulation of ideas in the song. The pattern of line grouping or "strophes" in the Cyclops' song of *Idyll* 11 is more varied. This song illustrates another way in which the poet may order his "strophes," namely, by circular composition. Verbal repetitions combine with similar patterns

[1] Gow gives a comprehensive bibliography of literature on this subject in his commentary (*Theocritus* 2.16).

[2] See, for example, C. Cessi, "La technica dell' 'incorniciamento' e delle 'metà' e l'arte di Teocrito" *Atti del reale istituto veneto di scienze* 83 (1923) 797 and 84 (1924) 95.

of line grouping to make the close of the song (67–79) closely parallel to the beginning (19–29). While the critic today cannot be satisfied with the mechanical methods of nineteenth century "strophic responsion" theorists, neither can he afford to minimize the fact that Theocritus' carefully controlled technique does use short apparent "strophes" which frequently relate in groups and contribute toward the formation of larger aspects in a poem's composition. The second idyll, *Pharmaceutria*, illustrates the full development of these compositional devices. Here it is immediately obvious that the "strophe" set off by refrains is the principal unit of structure, but the patterning of these "strophes" within the incantation and the song has long been a matter of dispute and requires detailed analysis.

The first and last strophes of the incantation form an obvious frame. Simaetha addresses Thestylis by name in both, and in both it is the servant who is to perform the rites. While the first strophe introduces Thestylis into the scene, the last strophe sends her on an errand and so removes her from the action. Verbal repetitions make these framing strophes closely parallel:

18 ἄλφιτά τοι πρῶτον πυρὶ τάκεται. ἀλλ' ἐπίπασσε,
19 Θεστυλί. δειλαία, πᾷ τὰς φρένας ἐκπεπότασαι;
20 ἦ ῥά γέ θην, μυσαρά, καὶ τὶν ἐπίχαρμα τέτυγμαι;
21 πάσσ' ἅμα καὶ λέγε ταῦτα· 'τὰ Δέλφιδος ὀστία πάσσω.'

58 σαύραν τοι τρίψασα κακὸν ποτὸν αὔριον οἰσῶ.
59 Θεστυλί, νῦν δὲ λαβοῖσα τὺ τὰ θρόνα ταῦθ' ὑπόμαξον
60 τᾶς τήνω φλιᾶς καθ' ὑπέρτερον ἃς ἔτι καὶ νύξ,
62 καὶ λέγ' ἐπιτρύζοισα 'τὰ Δέλφιδος ὀστία μάσσω.'

The opening strophe is rounded off and closed by the triple repetition of the verb *passein*, but the last strophe is not. Here the first line (58) links with the thought of the previous strophe, and the verbal echo of strophe one is held off until the last line (62 τὰ Δέλφιδος ὀστία μάσσω). Thus, while the first strophe stands by itself as a tightly closed unit, the last strophe develops out of the central bulk of the incantation, and only with the last line does it link itself with the first strophe to form half of the incantation's structural frame.

The pattern of the incantation within this frame is less obvious, and the problem is complicated by disagreement among the manu-

scripts as to the relative placement of the strophes. The thirteenth century manuscript K (the only surviving witness to the Ambrosian family) and the Antinoai papyrus (P_3 of Gow) agree in placing lines 28 to 32 after line 42, while all other manuscripts put these lines in what may be called their traditional position after line 27. Ahrens was the only nineteenth century editor to print the strophe in the delayed position of K. Wilamowitz preferred the traditional placement, but the other two important twentieth century editors, Gallavotti and Gow, have followed Ahrens in preferring the reading of K. These latter editors justify the reading of K and P_3 both on grounds of the superiority of the tradition represented by K (which according to Gallavotti reflects ultimately the readings of "un iperarchetipo . . . risalente all' età di Cesare") [3] and on grounds of the movement or structure of the ritual within the incantation as a whole.[4] In 1948 Gallavotti published a vigorous defence of his text in answer to criticism from Aristide Colonna.[5] Lavagnini then took up the opposition to Gallavotti, and in an article published in 1949 this scholar suggested that decision should be based on the poetic structure of the passage rather than on the admitted superiority of one family of manuscripts over another.[6] This had been the position of Colonna, but the analysis which he presented was too impressionistic and brief. However, it was Gallavotti himself who opened the path for Lavagnini's demand that the poetry must be the criterion, for Gallavotti admitted that the superiority of one family of manuscripts may be overridden "quando si mostri che la lezione falsa diplomaticamente è metallo sonante e buono per ragioni di logica, di lingua, di senso, e di poesia." [7] Gallavotti, of course, denied that the traditional order of strophes does yield better sense or finer poetry.

Gallavotti's views may be examined more closely. He based his analysis of the incantation on the supposition that the questionable strophe must come after line 42 because it marks a shift from the black magic of the first part of the incantation to the

[3] C. Gallavotti, "Nota di critica testuale e poesia" *Belfagor* 3 (1948) 206.

[4] *Ibid.*, 207–9, and Gow, *op. cit.* (above, note 1) 40.

[5] Gallavotti (above, note 3), and Aristide Colonna, "Per una edizione di Teocrito" *Paideia* 2 (1947) 224–28.

[6] C. Lavagnini, "Teocrito II.27–31" *Stud. ital. di filol. class.* 24, n.s. (1949–1950) 81–83.

[7] Gallavotti (above, note 3) 208.

white magic of the second half.[8] He claimed that in the first half the psychological development is

> vòlto alla distruzione e all' annientamento della persona amata: così è nelle strofe 1 e 2, in cui Simeta brucia e sparge farina come fossero le osse di Delfide, e distrugge nel fuoco un ramo di lauro come fosse la carne di Delfide.[9]

The fifth strophe then forms the transition: "ma il rito ora si piega dalla magia nera alla magia bianca, ed è volto a ricuperare l'amore di Delfide . . ."[10] Gallavotti concludes:

> basta avere mostrato il significato della strofe nel posto che tiene: il contrasto che è latente nell' animo della donna tradita e sfiduciata si rivela gradatamente, inavvertitamente: dallo spirito di vendetta e di male essa passa al rinnovato desiderio d'amore.[11]

This analysis forces on the incantation an overly simplified schematization which does not exist in reality. Themes of revenge and desire are not so neatly divided between the first and second halves of the incantation, but they are rather interwoven throughout almost every strophe. For example, Gow, in commenting on the burning of barley and laurel, rightly remarks that these rites have erotic overtones: "these spells . . . aim not at injuring Delphis but at reawakening a consuming passion."[12] It is in the second, not the first, half of the incantation that the revenge theme becomes definitely dominant: when Simaetha announces her intention of taking Delphis a poison, *kakon poton* (58).[13] The two themes are both present in lines 40–41 where Simaetha says:

> ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τήνῳ πᾶσα καταίθομαι ὅς με τάλαιναν
> ἀντὶ γυναικὸς ἔθηκε κακὰν καὶ ἀπάρθενον ἦμεν.

The fire here suggests both her wrath (her desire for revenge) and her passionate love: her contradictory feelings are tangled together

[8] *Ibid.* (above, note 3), 208–9. For the notion of black and white magic in this poem see Lavagnini, "Virgilio, Teocrito, e Sofrone" *L'Antiquité classique* 4 (1935) 153–55 and Rousel, "Art et folklore dans les *Φαρμακεύτριαι* de Théocrite," *REG* 45 (1932) 361–65.

[9] Gallavotti (above, note 3) 208.

[10] Gallavotti (above, note 3) 208.

[11] Gallavotti (above, note 3) 208.

[12] Gow (above, note 1) 40.

[13] Gow, however, interprets the *kakon poton* as a "dangerous love-philtre" and tries to minimize the revenge theme. See Gow, *ibid.*, 46.

in a metaphorical statement implying both attitudes at the same time.[14]

Gallavotti closes his analysis by stating that poetically the difference between the alternative strophe positions is slight:

> Naturalmente, se leggiamo la strofe subito dopo la strofe 2, il contrasto fra magia per la vendetta e magia per l'amore sussiste . . . *La differenza di valore poetico nelle due varianti* offerte dalla tradizione, *mi sembra troppo piccola*, perchè sul dato positivo offerto dalla critica diplomatica possa avere la prevalanza il nostro gusto e la nostra interpretazione della poesia[15] (italics mine).

This conclusion seems rather weak, for the critic should be able to distinguish in the poetical structure itself obvious and compelling reasons why each strophe must be where it is and nowhere else. Theocritus is too fine a master of composition to have written a poem in which strophes may be shifted in position without impairment of the central poetic effect. If a critic wishes to change the traditional order of lines in any of Theocritus' poems, the full burden of responsibility lies with that critic to prove conclusively (not merely on the basis of manuscript authority, but also on grounds of poetic economy) that such an order of lines and only such an order is acceptable.

Gow justified the delayed placement by pointing out that this strophe with its two ritual acts and two prayers compensates for the lack of both ritual act and prayer in the preceding strophe (38–41):

> In iv (38–41) the ritual has slowed down for a moment at the approach of the goddess and there is neither act nor prayer either stated or implied; in compensation, the next quatrain, which is also the central quatrain of the poem, contains two acts and two prayers.[16]

It is hard to see why this "compensation" should be necessary, and one would have liked Gow to have shown just what is accomplished by making this strophe the "central quatrain of the poem."

Lavagnini has ably countered Gallavotti's analysis of the incantation's structure (and his arguments hold equally against Gow) by pointing out that the delayed placement of the strophe interrupts

[14] See below, page 292.
[15] Gallavotti (above, note 3) 209.
[16] Gow (above, note 1) 40.

the logical movement of the ritual.[17] Simaetha begins with a series of ritual acts and prayers which continues into strophe 33–36 (*νῦν θυσῶ τὰ πίτυρα*) but stops there with the sudden appearance of the goddess. Simaetha's excited reaction to the theophany leads to the brief contrast with the calm of the sea and winds, and then Simaetha expresses the anguish of her tormented soul before the revealed goddess (39–41). While the goddess is still present, Simaetha pours the triple libation and invokes the goddess (*potnia* 43), addressing the following prayer directly to the deity. Lavagnini rightly objects to having the questionable strophe break this obvious line of continuity between the appearance of the goddess in lines 33–41 and Simaetha's triple libation and invocation of the goddess in 43.[18] Unfortunately, Lavagnini concludes his study by suggesting that the strophe should be placed after line 46 where there is no justification for placing it.

I believe that the traditional placement of the strophe is the right one (i.e. after line 27), and that only by placing it there can one see the true structure of the whole incantation. The "differenza di valore poetico nelle due varianti" is actually considerable, quite enough to outweigh the admitted superiority of K.[19] The following analysis based on the traditional text is offered in support of this assertion.

The first strophe, as has been said, forms an introduction of both the servant Thestylis and of the ritual acts. The remainder of the strophes may be divided into four groups of two strophes each. Such a division into two strophe groups may at first glance seem arbitrary and unwarranted, but the connecting links between the strophes in each group are in reality quite strong.

Strophes two and three (23–26, 28–31) form the first group and contain a common structure composed of ritual act followed by prayer. This structure exists only here in the incantation and thus sets these strophes off from the others. Other strophes contain ritual acts, and two other strophes contain prayers, but only strophes two and three contain both. Parallel sentence structure and word placement emphasize the parallel content:

[17] Lavagnini (above, note 6) 82.

[18] Lavagnini (above, note 6) 82.

[19] If I am right that K has misplaced this strophe, this will add another example to the list of errors introduced by K at points where all the other MSS. agree on the right reading. Gallavotti quotes a list of such errors (Gallavotti, ed. *Theocritus quique feruntur bucolici graeci* [Roma 1946] 244).

23 Δέλφις ἔμ' ἀνίασεν· ἐγὼ δ' ἐπὶ Δέλφιδι δάφναν
24 αἴθω· χὡς αὔτα λακεῖ μέγα καππυρίσασα
25 κἠξαπίνας ἄφθη κοὐδὲ σποδὸν εἴδομες αὐτᾶς,
26 οὕτω τοι καὶ Δέλφις ἐνὶ φλογὶ σάρκ' ἀμαθύνοι.

28 ὡς τοῦτον τὸν κηρὸν ἐγὼ σὺν δαίμονι τάκω,
29 ὣς τάκοιθ' ὑπ' ἔρωτος ὁ Μύνδιος αὐτίκα Δέλφις.
30 χὡς δινεῖθ' ὅδε ῥόμβος ὁ χάλκεος ἐξ 'Αφροδίτας,
31 ὣς τῆνος δινοῖτο ποθ' ἁμετέραισι θύραισιν.

Further, common erotic imagery unites these two strophes. The ritual acts are designed to re-awaken passion and desire in Delphis.[20] Calculated verbal ambiguity exists in the second strophe (23–26) where the burning of the bay and the wasting away of Delphis' flesh in flame have both a literal, ritual meaning and an implied, erotic meaning. The fire is the real fire which provides part of the stage scenery of the whole incantation and in which the bay is burned, but it is also the fire of love which Simaetha wishes to rekindle in Delphis and to burn in his flesh. While this erotic dimension is merely implied in the second strophe, it becomes the literal statement in the third strophe (28–31) when Simaetha prays that Delphis may waste away with love as the wax melts in the fire. Erotic-fire imagery here is closely related to that of the previous strophe. The final ritual act (the spinning of the *rhombos*) and the prayer that Delphis may spin around Simaetha's door abandon the fire imagery. However, this final wish would seem also to have erotic implications, for it is under the direct influence of Aphrodite (30) that the *rhombos* spins. Common structure, purpose, and imagery, then, unite these two strophes.

While line 33 suggests a continuation of the ritual acts and prayers contained in the previous two strophes, the appearance of the goddess breaks off the ritual. A connecting link with the two preceding strophes is thus established, but the break is decisive. It is the theophany and Simaetha's reaction to it which control strophes four and five. If erotic imagery united the two preceding stanzas, sound dominates these two. Dogs howl throughout the city (35). With line 36 the bronze gong is sounded to keep the goddess at a safe distance.[21] It is this loud noise which introduces the beginning of the next strophe, where Simaetha by way of

[20] Gow (above, note 1) 40.
[21] Gow (above, note 1) 43.

contrast remarks on the silence of sea and winds. This awe-inspiring silence is doubtless a direct result of the theophany,[22] and one is to imagine Simaetha's following words as spoken to the revealed goddess. The sound-*versus*-silence idea is still dominant as Simaetha reveals her distressed soul to the goddess, for she contrasts her inner turmoil and anguish with the external silence of sea and winds (39). In her following words she briefly but poignantly states her case before the goddess (40–41). Her plea is that of one unjustly treated: she demands revenge as if she were before a court of law. These two strophes, then, are closely bound together by the dramatic encounter of Simaetha with the revealed goddess and by emphasis on the sound and silence (both external and psychological) which accompany the theophany.

Line 43 with the invocation of the goddess (πότνια) links this strophe (43–46) with the previous strophe much as 33 provides a transition between stanzas three and four. However, the topic has changed from Simaetha's anguished plea before the goddess to an extended prayer for Delphis' return which occupies this and the following strophe (48–51). While this section begins with a ritual libation, there is no ritual act in the second strophe.[23] Simaetha's thoughts are no longer completely controlled by the ritual acts immediately before her, and her imagination wanders off to the fabled *hippomanes* of the Arcadians. This imaginative vagrancy stresses an element of fantasy which is present in the preceding strophe (43–46) with its introduction of the Theseus–Ariadne myth. Simaetha prays that Delphis may forget his new love just as Theseus forgot Ariadne. The reader may easily suspect that the roles should be reversed, for Delphis has already left Simaetha just as Theseus abandoned Ariadne. Simaetha may be imagined to have had Ariadne on her mind for some time, but with herself playing the role of Ariadne abandoned on Dia rather than thinking of Delphis playing the unfaithful Theseus to his new love. As Simaetha's imagination passes from the Ariadne myth to the Arcadian *hippomanes* which drives horses and colts mad, she prays that she may see Delphis, "like to one driven mad," coming back to her from the gymnasium. This paraphrase does not do justice to the dream-like quality of the lines:

[22] Gow (above, note 1) 43.

[23] Gow (above, note 1) 40, however, suggests that Simaetha actually has *hippomanes* and throws it into the fire.

ὡς καὶ Δέλφιν ἴδοιμι, καὶ ἐς τόδε δῶμα περάσαι
μαινομένῳ ἴκελος λιπαρᾶς ἔκτοσθε παλαίστρας.

This vision of Delphis driven mad like a Bacchant and coming to the abandoned Simaetha may be seen as having grown out of the Theseus–Ariadne simile at the end of the previous strophe. The roles have here shifted to what I have suggested was the original version of the story in Simaetha's mind, i.e. with her the abandoned Ariadne bemoaning her fate on Dia. Here she dreams of a Delphis who has changed roles, who has become Bacchus (*mainomenôi ikelos*) instead of the unfaithful Theseus, and who comes to her in a frenzy as Bacchus came to Ariadne on Dia. The assignment of roles in the myth thus shifts from strophe to strophe, and the mythological names are not mentioned in the second strophe, but in both strophes it is the Theseus–Ariadne–Dionysus myth which controls Simaetha's words. The fury-inspiring *hippomanes* introduces the implied shift in roles from Delphis as Theseus to Delphis as the frenzied Bacchus. The unity of these two strophes exists, then, not only in the common prayer for Delphis' return, but also in identically rooted and continuously developed mythological imagery.

The last two stanzas break with the fantasy of this mythological world and return to the bitter reality of the situation. The destruction of the last remnant of Delphis' love, the piece of his garment, leads to the statement that Simaetha will mix a poison and take it to Delphis tomorrow. These two stanzas are dominated by the drastically realistic and bitter picture of Eros, who, like a swamp leech, has drunk all the black blood from Simaetha's veins. All here is directed toward the bitterness and gall of the abandoned woman. The harsh tone underlines the thoughts uppermost in Simaetha's mind in these stanzas: revenge and death.

It may be said, then, that the traditional arrangement of text permits one to see a consistent, clear, and logically developed structure in the incantation. The first and last strophes provide a strong frame within which one may recognize four groups of two strophes each. The first group presents Simaetha trying to reawaken the fires of love in Delphis by sympathetic magic. In the second group the goddess appears, and Simaetha states her plight before the divinity. The third group continues the heightened poetic, imaginative, and dramatic quality of the goddess–Simaetha

encounter and presents the prayer for Delphis' return under the form of the Ariadne–Theseus–Dionysus myth. Finally, in the fourth group Simaetha lets her resentment, gall, and helplessness get the better of her, and she develops her thoughts around images oriented toward death.

In addition to the framing beginning and end, there exists also a definite center for the incantation. This central point occurs in lines 38–41, which form the numerical center (i.e. four strophes to either side), and it is also the dramatic center, for here Simaetha directly confronts the revealed goddess. Here is the only strophe which contains no ritual act and no prayer, but it rather consists purely of comment by Simaetha about herself and her love for Delphis. This comment is thoroughly ambiguous, for the word *kataithomai* must be taken two ways: Simaetha burns with anger at the man who has deflowered her instead of making her his wife, but she also burns with passionate love and desire for that very man in spite of the wrong done. These inconsistent and contradictory attitudes are greatly emphasized by being thrown into relief at the center of the incantation; it is this same ambiguity which controls much of the incantation and exists at the core of Simaetha's attitude during the whole poem. Thus, the center of the incantation consists of a vivid dramatic encounter which permits the poetic level to rise to a point where Simaetha's total complex attitude stands revealed in a few simple words.

The incantation may be diagrammed as follows:

17–21 (introductory strophe)

22–26
27–31

32–36
37–41 (central strophe)

42–46
47–51

52–56
57–62 (closing, framing strophe)

Exactly the same technique of dramatic encounter combined with psychological analysis provides the basic pattern of the narra-

tive of Simaetha's love (64–143). This narrative divides into two parts: the description of how Simaetha first met Delphis (64–86) and the story of their first intimacy (94–143). The narrative is patterned around three ascending climaxes. The first climax records Simaetha's immediate reaction when she first saw Delphis (82–86); this is the high point dramatically and psychologically in the first part of the narrative. Simaetha describes her reaction to the meeting first in terms of fire imagery (familiar to the reader from the incantation) and then in terms of disease. The second climax is reached when Thestylis brings Delphis to Simaetha (106–10). Again the dramatic encounter provides the opportunity for Simaetha to give a vivid analysis of her love, this time in terms of Sapphic imagery.[24] These lines form the dramatic and poetic climax of the whole poem, as the tone is somewhat reduced and sombered at the end. The scene here (138–43) has two dramatic dimensions, for Simaetha is describing the consummation of love between herself and Delphis as she directs her words to the moon, her only *confidante* in the poem. It is in this imagined dialogue between herself and the moon that she develops the imagery central to this third dramatic climax. Certainly fire imagery is not absent here (e.g. 140, 141), but the final lines abandon this imagery (142–43). Simaetha's words to the moon suggest rather that the mysteries are uppermost in her mind; the implication is that the consummation of her love was most like the final vision of the mysteries. Line 142 literally means that Simaetha will not tell a long story to the moon, but it implies also that the story which she has to tell is one which should be kept silent and secret. Like the mysteries, it is not to be divulged. This implication is continued in the next line with the words ἐπράχθη τὰ μέγιστα which suggest the succinct and cryptic type of statement with which one would expect an initiate to describe the consummation of the mysteries. The phrase expresses the magnitude of the experience without revealing any of the details which must be kept secret. This, then, is the basic pattern of the narrative: three climaxes built around vivid dramatic encounters which provide opportunities for Simaetha's most telling self-analysis. The technique is exactly the same as in the incantation where the center of the circular composition presents Simaetha's anguished plea before the revealed goddess.

[24] Gow (above, note 1) 54. Cf. Sappho, Fr. 2.

More could be said about the finely crafted composition of this poem, but enough has been said to defend the traditional arrangement of strophes in the incantation. Three techniques of strophic composition have been illustrated: the frame, arrangement of strophes in pairs, and grouping of these units around a center or a core consisting of a highly dramatic scene. These techniques may be paralleled in other idylls. As noted at the beginning of this study, Bucaeus' song of *Idyll* 10 employs pairs of couplets, and the Cyclops' song of *Idyll* 11 exhibits a circular composition. Theocritus' use of these techniques in his various poems is never rigid or canonic as the "strophic responsion" theorists would have us believe, but the poet displays instead great flexibility in fusing structure with matter and matter with structure according to the needs of each individual poem. Therefore, few generalizations may be made about his technique of strophic composition, a phenomenon which must rather be studied as it occurs in each separate poem.