

X. Illustrative Elisions in Catullus

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"Catullus was unusually fond of elision, admitting it freely under almost any circumstance." With this one sentence Merrill, in his durable school edition¹ of the poems of Catullus, has done with the subject. Even the dullest undergraduate, sampling the poems for the first time, can see for himself that here elisions abound—two or three or more to a line in many of the shorter poems; as many as eight in one four-line epigram. And while the proportion in the longer poems is not quite so high, it is notably higher than in comparable pieces by later poets. Catullus' work is almost pock-marked with elisions, nearly a thousand of them, and one is tempted to quote Catullus *contra Catullum* (22.4–5):

puto esse ego illi milia aut decem aut plura
perscripta.

For Merrill and most editors it was enough to note this, and to excuse Catullus for any excesses on the ground that he came early in the development of the literature. According to H. J. Rose,

Latin poetry, as it grew older, became more and more sensitive to elisions . . . all but the easiest elisions, for example that of a short final *e*, came to be more and more avoided by careful writers, Ovid setting the example.²

But must we charge Catullus, that *lepidissimus poeta*, with insensitivity at all? It is an early nineteenth-century textbook that

¹ *Catullus*, ed. Elmer Truesdell Merrill (Cambridge [Mass.] 1893) xlix. Except where noted, I have used the Oxford text of R. A. B. Mynors (1958). Pertinent works not mentioned in the following notes are Thomas Cutt, *Meter and Diction in Catullus' Hendecasyllabics* (Diss. Chicago, 1936); Clyde Murley, "Life, Logic and Language." *CJ* 38 (1942–43) 280–88; W. A. Oldfather, "The Most Extreme Case of Elision in the Latin Language?" *CJ* 38 (1942–43) 478–79; Maurice Platnauer, *Latin Elegiac Verse* (Cambridge 1951); A. W. Verrall, "A Metrical Jest of Catullus" in *Collected Studies* (Cambridge 1913) 249–67. I would like to thank Professor Douglas F. S. Thomson of University College, Toronto, for his kind suggestions in the preparation of this paper.

² *A Handbook of Latin Literature* (London 1958) 259.

says of elisions that they "are in general injurious to harmony, and their frequent recurrence is very disagreeable."³ Today we think of them as natural to Latin expression. In addition, we are reappraising the Roman background of Catullus, and his transference of popular language from the stage and the street to the meters of *lyra Graeca* seems to us wonderfully sly and even somewhat subversive.⁴ Far from avoiding elisions, he favors them, not so much in the ambitious pieces, but in the personal lyrics, when he is caught up in moods of exaltation and despair. It is interesting to note how elisions will accumulate when Catullus is excited or depressed. In the soul-searching *Si qua recordanti*, for example, there are 31 elisions in 26 lines; in the heart-broken *Nulla potest mulier* there are 8 in 4 lines.

A psychologist who is also a statistician and something of a poet himself might find rewarding material for a study here. In this paper, however, I would like to examine a different aspect of Catullus' elisions: some of them are *illustrative*; because elision involves the rapid or clipped pronunciation of a syllable, or in effect the merging of two words, it can and often does become, in Catullus' hands, a graphic accommodation of sound to sense. Perhaps one in ten is suggestive or illustrative in this way. These I intend to record, without delving into the more technical aspects of prosody.

The most striking cases illustrate some sort of cutting. The very first elision in the corpus (1.2), *pumice expolitum*, is a case in point: the pumice stone has been worn away in the process of polishing. The same point is made at greater length in the Sufferus-poem (22.8):

directa plumbo et pumice omnia aequata.

It is difficult to believe that Catullus did not intend the elisions to suggest the cutting and wearing away of the lead, the pumice and the papyrus. For even though the elided vowels were almost surely pronounced,⁵ the effect of the elisions on the imagination

³ J. Carey, *Latin Prosody Made Easy* (London 1808) 338. But contrast, a century later, S. E. Winbolt, *Latin Hexameter Verse* (London 1903) 166-87.

⁴ See, in particular, Kenneth Quinn, *The Catullan Revolution* (Melbourne 1959); H. Bardon, "Catulle et ses modèles poétiques de langue latine," *Latomus* (1957) 614-27; and Piero Pucci, "Il Carme 50 di Catullo," *Maia* 13 (1961) 249-56.

⁵ The best ancient evidence is Valerius Probus in Aulus Gellius 13.21.6. See also W. R. Hardie, *Res metrica* (Oxford 1920) 39-40.

is, as the word *elidere* suggests, to dash out, to shatter or crush the vowels.

Similarly, there is a suggestion of cutting in the elision as well as in the narrative in 63.5:

devolsit ili acuto sibi pondera silice,

and there may be something intended in the clipped ending of poem 11, the picture of the *prati* / *ultimi flos* hypermetrically touched by the plough passing by (11.22–24):

tactus aratro est.

I am not attempting now to attribute to Catullus any kind of sledge-hammer literalness. Not every image of cutting calls forth an elision, like a Wagnerian leitmotiv, from the poet. (Polyxena bows her headless trunk in three smoothly flowing hexameters.) But there are too many illustrative elisions to allow us to ignore them. And they are not as obvious as they necessarily seem when pointed out. The effect of elision on the imagination, as on the texture of the line, can be subtle and even beautiful, as when Catullus uses it to suggest the breaking of an oath (76.4):

divum ad fallendos numine abusum homines,

and the corrosive effect of an evil friendship (77.3–4):

sicine subrepsti mi, atque intestina perurens
ei misero eripuisti omnia nostra bona.

I pass now to another figure—from images of cutting to images of swallowing, from separation to assimilation and unity. Actually, the majority of Catullus' elisions suggest not so much breakage as the meeting and merging of the broken ends. Such formations as *magnopere* and *animadverto* remind us that this is the precise effect of elision on the language.

Thus, Catullus pictures Troy as a vast, engulfing tomb (68.89–90):

Troia (nefas!) commune sepulcrum Asiae Europaeque,
Troia virum et virtutum omnium acerba cinis.

Elisions are very effective in reinforcing this grim metaphor. And they can underscore the humor in a light use of the same

metaphor; death devours, with all pretty things, Lesbia's sparrow (3.14-15):

... *quæ omnia bella devoratis*;
tam bellum mihi passerem abstulistis.

Yet the sparrow itself once opened its beak for Lesbia's finger (2.3):

cui primum digitum dare appetenti.

The fires of passion also consume in elisions (35.15),

ignes interiorem edunt medullam,

as does Cominius' vulture (108.4):

lingua exsecta avido sit data vulturio,

and Mentula's pot (94.2):

ipsa olera olla legit.

Catullus uses elisions to depict the headlong fall of the detestable Colonian elder into the mud (17.9):

ire praecipitem in lutum,

and the hustling of Ravidus into a verbal pillory (40.2):

agit praecipitem in meos iambos,

and the precipitation of Mentula from the mount of the Muses (105.2):

Musae furcillis praecipitem eiciunt.

Similarly, oars are dipped into the sea (4.17):

tuos imbuisse palmulas in aequore,

and the sparrow hides in Lesbia's bosom (2.2):

quem in sinu tenere,

and (3.8):

nec sese a gremio illius movebat.

Particularly graphic are the many elisions which are used to suggest, in a word, stickiness. The idle spirit of the Colonian elder remains in the mud like an old horseshoe (17.25-26):

et supinum animum in gravi derelinquere caeno,
ferream ut soleam tenaci in voragine mula.

Catullus asks Thallus to take his sticky fingers off the cloak, napkins and tablets he has appropriated, and send them back (25.9):

quae nunc tuis ab unguibus reglutina et remitte.

Even the lock of Berenice's hair shows a liquid reluctance to leave its mistress (66.63):

uvidulam a fluctu cedentem ad templa.

Juventius wipes away one of Catullus' kisses in the line (99.8):

guttis abstersisti omnibus articulis.

An elision depicts the draining of an Arcadian marsh (68.110):

siccare emulsa pingue palude solum,

as well as fat melting in the fire (90.6):

omentum in flamma pingue liquefaciens,

and Catullus' coughing his cold away (44.7):

pectore expuli tussim.

One of the loveliest uses of elision suggests the mother's reluctance to yield her daughter to the bridegroom (62.21-22):

qui natam possis complexu avellere matris,
complexu matris retinentem avellere natam.

Elisions are used to reinforce metaphors of binding as well. Captive Asia is bound to Egypt (66.36):

captam Asiam Aegypti finibus addiderat;

Ida's peaks are girt with snow (63.70):

ego viridis algida Idae nive amicta loca colam;

and love binds the soul as ivy does the tree—in elisions (61.33-35):

mentem amore revinciens,
ut tenax hedera huc et huc
arborem implicat errans.

Catullus uses elisions invoking his hendecasyllabics to surround a prostitute and shout her down (42.10,18):

circumsistite eam et reflagitate . . .
conclamate iterum altiore voce.

Locking elisions are admirably suited to express lovers' embraces, and Catullus uses them often in such contexts (64.372):

quare agite optatos animi coniungite amores;

61.3-4:

qui rapis teneram ad virum
virginem, o Hymenae Hymen;

61.56-57:

tu fero iuveni in manus
floridam ipse puellulam.

Even those strange bedfellows, Caesar and Mamurra, can be locked in elisions (57.7):

uno in lecticulo erudituli ambo.

Catullus closes the doors on his lovers with an elision (61.224):

claudite ostia, virgines.

Sexual union is indicated by elisions (62.46):

cum castum amisit polluto corpore florem,

often in scathingly abusive passages, such as the hypermetrical 11.19-20:⁶

omnium / ilia rumpens

Elisions are also used to heighten an impression of size or length. The wind that threatens Furius' farm is made more formidable, and more humorous, by being made (26.5) a

ventum horribilem atque pestilentem,

while Mentula's bounteous estate seems even more extensive for being hypermetrically itemized (115.5-6):

prata arva ingentes silvas saltusque paludesque
usque ad Hyperboreos et mare ad Oceanum,

and Venus' litany seems the more interminable because it is strung together with elisions (36.12-15):

quae sanctum Idalium Uriosque apertos
quaeque Ancona Cnidumque harundinosam
colis quaeque Amathunta quaeque Golgos
quaeque Durrachium Hadriae tabernam.

⁶ Other instances are 15.15-18, 56.6, 80.7-8, 100.3.

There are other examples (13.5):

et vino et sale et omnibus cachinnis;

23.14:

sole et frigore et esuritione;

68.152:

haec atque illa dies, atque alia atque alia.

Sometimes elisions serve to reinforce patterns in the poems, especially in that poem of patterns and antiphons, the second epithalamium (62.44):

nulli illum pueri, nullae optavere puellae;

62.53:

hunc nulli agricolae, nulli accolluere iuveni;

62.55–56:

multi illam agricolae, multi accolluere iuveni:
sic virgo dum intacta manet, dum inculta senescit.⁷

One such “pattern-elision” is used four times in as many poems, with slight variations (10.21):⁸

neque hic neque illic;

50.5:

modo hoc modo illoc;

15.7:

modo huc modo illuc,

the last being used again in the poem on Lesbia’s sparrow, where it is almost certainly onomatopoeic (3.9):

sed circumsiliens modo huc modo illuc.

Finally, there are eighteen⁹ pentameters in which Catullus deliberately ignores the falling rhythm of the verse, introducing an elision midway to connect the two hemistichs. Three of these (the evil friendship, 77.4; Troy as a tomb, 68.90, and Juventius,

⁷ I have departed from the Oxford text here; Mynors reads *colluere* in lines 53 and 55.

⁸ Mynors reads *nec hic*.

⁹ See Emory B. Lease, “Elision in Diaeresis of the Pentameter of Catullus,” *CR* 15 (1901) 362, where fifteen examples are cited, and add 88.6, 99.8, 104.4.

99.8) I have already cited. The effect is startling because “neither hiatus nor elision is allowed” here. “Elision is at all events extremely rare—practically forbidden.”¹⁰ In all the rest of Latin literature there are only three examples, one in Lucilius (Martial 11.90.4) and two in Propertius (1.5.32 and 3[4].22.10). Perhaps three of Catullus’ eighteen lines are corrupt, though this does not seem to affect the elisions in question.¹¹ Nor must we say that Catullus was so poor a poet as to be unable to avoid these unusual, not to say violent, occurrences.

It is worth noting, then, that five of these disrupt the balance of the *concluding* line in poems addressed to friends who have disappointed Catullus (71.6):

illam affligit odore, ipse perit podagra;

73.6:

quam modo qui me unum atque unicum amicum habuit;

75.4:

nec desistere amare, omnia si facias;

91.10:

culpa est, in quacumque est aliquid sceleris;

104.4:

sed tu cum Tappone omnia monstra facis.

Harshness is not inappropriate in these contexts, especially at the close of the statement.

Among the other instances, the forestalling of diaeresis in 68, 99 and 101 heightens a mood of sorrow and frustration (68.56):

cessarent tristique imbre madere genae;

99.12:

non cessasti omnique excruciare modo;

101.4:

et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem.

And in 88, 90 and 97, poems of invective, the same phenomenon expresses contempt and disgust (88.6):

nec genitor Nympharum abluit Oceanus;

¹⁰ See Hardie (above, note 5) 51.

¹¹ See G. P. Goold, “A New Text of Catullus,” *Phoenix* 12 (1958) 106–11.

90.4:

si vera est Persarum impia religio;

97.2:

utrumne os an culum olfacerem Aemilio.

The most notorious of these lines (73.6),

quam modo qui me unum atque unicum amicum habuit,

we no longer consider "absolutely detestable."¹² Goold has pointed out "how natural elision was in Latin and how unnatural hiatus," that the line "cannot have been . . . anything but perfectly natural Latin."¹³ I suspect, too, that it is wrong to treat it as mock-serious;¹⁴ as we have seen, Catullus does not use this effect for humorous purposes. The poem reads best as a calculated expression of bitterness: in its first five lines the meter is regular, the rhythms balanced; there is only one elision; then, in this last line, diaeresis is prevented by an elision—and to the end of the poem each word is run into the next so that no caesura or diaeresis is possible. Could the disillusioned poet better express his bitterness and frustration?¹⁵

A non-technical discussion such as this does not permit one to draw conclusions. I have not cited the plays of Plautus and Terence, which offer similar cases of elision in abundance. And even in Catullus, it need hardly be said that for every elision that may be emotionally or pictorially significant there are nine others *metri causa*, or for euphony, or simply because Catullus chose to use them, or because he invariably expressed himself in *neque ad's* and *atque in's*. But this is not to say that the one-in-ten is not a conscious attempt to reinforce lyric expression. Catullus was, after all, "unusually fond of elision"; he was an enthusiastic experimenter—and of all the sons of Romulus he had the liveliest imagination.

¹² Carey (above, note 3) 339.

¹³ Goold (above, note 11) 110.

¹⁴ P. E. Postgate, for example, has suggested that the line was first written by a friend of Catullus, thanking him for some favor, and that Catullus, deeming it bad poetry and a wretched expression of thanks, quoted it *verbatim* in reply. See *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 151–52 (1932) 6.

¹⁵ The four instances of elision preventing diaeresis in pentameter which do not seem to be either pictorially or emotionally significant are 67.44, 68.10, 82 and 95.2.

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