

CATULLUS 68.53: THE COHERENCE AND FORCE OF TRADITION¹

ARTHUR G. ROBSON

Beloit College

nam mihi quam dederit duplex Amathusia curam,
scitis, et in quo me torruerit genere,
cum tantum arderem quantum Trachinia rupes
lympaque in Oetaeis Malia Thermopylis,
maesta neque assiduo tabescere lumina fletu
cessarent tristique imbre madere genae.²

Many know what sorrow two-faced Venus' gift brought me—
and how she managed the pain consuming me.
On fire with the Trachinian flame,
as fevered as the hot stream of Oetean Thermopylae,
my pained eyes melt in a ceaseless flow of tears,
which in their numb course tumble down my cheeks.

As this translation of 68.51–56 may suggest, Catullus' imagery and similes are more easily described and discussed than represented in an English version.³ The overlay of exaggerated seriousness, mock-grandeur, and colloquialism poses problems that are not easily surmounted. Even the two words that are of paramount concern for this discussion, *Trachinia rupes*, should receive in English a slight adaptation in sense; for a literal translation, "Trachinian cliffs," would diverge at least as much from the feeling intended by Catullus.

Editors adhere to the manuscript reading of *Trinacria rupes*, but not all of them are happy about doing so. E. T. Merrill sees a problem,

¹ I am indebted to Professors K. M. Abbott, C. A. Forbes, and R. J. Lenardon for their advice on this paper. Their assent to its conclusions should not be assumed.

² Catullus 68.51–56.

³ See T. E. Kinsey, "Some Problems in Catullus 68," *Latomus* 26 (1967) 46–47.

but on my hypothesis, misplaces his concern. He focuses his attention upon *rupes*, and takes the trouble to offer two brief references supporting the use of *rupes* for *mons* in describing Mt. Aetna.⁴ The second citation is Grat. Cyn. 430: *Est in Trinacria specus ingens rupe*. Merrill's point, I take it, is not so much that Grattius borrowed the reading from Catullus as it is that he saw fit to describe Aetna with the same inappropriate noun. One may, of course, more easily forgive this lapse in Grattius than in Catullus. Merrill's other reference is to Catullus 61.28: *Thespieae rupis Aonios specus*. In this instance, however, *rupis* is not intended to be coextensive with *mons*. *Thespieae* and *Aonios* should be read as allusive, approximate designations appropriate to the general region rather than as scientifically exact, topographical designations. *Thespieae* should therefore be seen as a general reference, as *Aonios* must be. This much said, we are able to view *rupis* as dependent upon *specus* for its sense as much as it is upon *Thespieae*.⁵ We are left, then, to conclude that Professor Merrill's two examples are not apposite, but that his concern surely is. *Trinacria rupes* is not a satisfactory way to describe Mt. Aetna. *Trachinia rupes*, on the other hand, is eminently sensible, releases us from the illusion that we are talking about Aetna at all, and affords us a far greater degree of coherence in the text. Before turning to a fuller development of these points, we are obliged to examine the defense of *Trinacria rupes* on the basis of borrowings.

If I have misread Merrill's brief note on line 53, and he does, in fact, mean to suggest that Grattius is borrowing from Catullus, the response must be that this is not very likely. The weakest argument is that Grattius' reading of *Trinacria* is not certain and is a matter of dispute in the manuscripts. Far more significant is the competition which Catullus faces. His line 53 is not the most likely of the eight or more parallels which M. Verdière cites in his commentary upon the text of

⁴ *Catullus* (Cambridge, Mass. 1951 [reprint of 1893 edition]) 183.

⁵ See Wilhelm Kroll, *C. Valerius Catullus*⁵ (Stuttgart 1968) 109–10 nn.; and C. J. Fordyce, *Catullus* (Oxford 1961) 242. Fordyce notes (350) that in 68.53 *Trinacria* "appears for the first time in Latin." The same statement would be true of *Trachinia*. No argument can be formulated from the frequency of either word's occurrence after Catullus. It may also be noted here that it is not possible to formulate an argument for either reading which is based upon metrical considerations. By this test either reading is appropriate.

Grattius.⁶ If however, we should accept as fact the undemonstrable assumption that this phrase is a borrowing, the affirmation would not entirely disappear by the substitution of one Greek proper name for another.

With the subtlety which characterizes his entire volume on Horace, Fraenkel speaks of Horace's relation to Catullus as "reminiscences" and "affinities" more often than as "echoes" or indebtedness. Faced with a different task approached more narrowly, R. Ellis, followed by Kroll, takes it that Ovid, *Rem. Am.* 491 follows Catullus: *infelix media torberis Aetna*. Ellis' citation of Horace, *Epode* 17.30: *ardeo quantum . . . nec Sicana fervida virens in Aetna flamma*, is repeated by Merrill who adds, along with Kroll, Ovid, *Heroides* 15.12: *me calor Aetnaeo non minor igne tenet*. Fordyce accepts all three "similarities."⁷ If the reading is *Trinacria*, the word "similarities" represents a sober judgment. A much less defensible judgment would be that these phrases clearly constitute "borrowings." If the reading is *Trachinia*, the similarities cease to exist, similarities which in any case cannot logically be cited to defend, even upon an *a fortiori* basis, the present reading over the proposed emendation.⁸

The proposed emendation makes the geographical references of the couplet consistent and coherent as well as, in terms of poetic sense, allusively more potent. Accepting *torruerit* as the correct reading in line 52 (although this is not essential to the argument), the imagery of heat proceeds from here to *arderem*, to *Trachinia* (whose noun-form designates the town on Mt. Oeta where Heracles suffered the pain of the heat or the heat of pain), to *Thermopylis*—which got its name from the vicinity's hot springs and which is bounded by Mt. Oeta and the Malian Gulf, to a softening of the imagery in *tabescere*, line 55.

Trachinia rupes should be read as equivalent to Herodotus' *Τρηχίνιαι πέτραι*, the Trachinian cliffs west of the Asopus gorge which form the

⁶ Raoul Verdrière, *Gratti Cynegeticon quae supersunt* (Wetteren [Belgium] n.d. [after 1957]) 2.384–85.

⁷ Eduard Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1966 [reprint of 1957 edition]); Robinson Ellis, *A Commentary on Catullus*² (Oxford 1889); Kroll, above, n. 5; Merrill (above, n. 4); Fordyce (above, n. 5).

⁸ Professor J. Ferguson in "Catullus and Ovid," *AJP* 81 (1960) 349 briefly mentions the possible influence of Catullus 68 on Ovid. The same author is less cautious in "Catullus and Horace," *AJP* 77 (1956) 1–18. Particularly unconvincing is his discussion of Horace's debt in the *Epodes* to Catullus.

face of Mt. Oeta.⁹ Herodotus' major references to Trachis are in two sections (7.175-78; 198-201). The first provides a general description of the Greek forces at Thermopylae and Artemisium; the second familiarizes us with the topography of Thermopylae. The most famous anecdote about Trachis, appearing initially in Herodotus and later in a variant form in Plutarch, is succinctly recounted in Cicero. Predicting victory at Thermopylae the Persian representative's boast, *Solem prae iaculorum multitudine et sagittarum non videbitis*, is greeted with a laconic response: *In umbra igitur pugnabimus*.¹⁰

The heat, pain, and fire of battle, however, are not the images most commonly associated with Trachis. Trachinia or Trachis, town or district,¹¹ gained early fame from Heracles, after whom the local town of Heracleia was named.¹² Herodotus refers to the *Θερμὰ λουτρά*, the hot springs in the pass of Thermopylae, and to the altar above them dedicated to Heracles.¹³ Heracles' arrival in the area is traced in aetiological fashion to the voyage of the Argonauts. Jason, Herodotus tells us (7.193.4), sent Heracles ashore to fetch water and there abandoned him. Heracles' association with the Trachinian region and its *Θερμὰ λουτρά* became widely known, so much so that in time any warm springs could be readily referred to as *Ἡράκλεια λουτρά*. The warm springs, "over 120 F." at Trachinia,¹⁴ were created by a solicitous Athena or Hephaestus to renew the weary Heracles.

It is possible that Heracles was made weary as much by his complicated amours as he was by his labors of a different sort. Sophocles' *Trachiniae* focuses upon Deianeira's attempt to reclaim Heracles' love from Iole through the use of a love charm given her by Nessus.¹⁵ In

⁹ See Herodotus 7.198.1; A. R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks* (New York 1968 [reprint of 1962 edition]) 408-15; C. Hignett, *Xerxes' Invasion of Greece* (Oxford 1963) Appendix 2, 356-60, *et passim*; W. K. Pritchett, *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography, part one* (Berkeley 1965) 71-82.

¹⁰ Herodotus, 7.226; Plutarch, *Moralia: Sayings of Spartans* 225B, Leonidas no. 6; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 1.42.101.

¹¹ See W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus* (Oxford 1964 [reprint of 1912 edition]) 2.207, n. 176.2.

¹² See Hignett (above n. 9).

¹³ 7.176.3. See also Strabo 9.4.12-13.

¹⁴ How and Wells (above, n. 11), 2.208.

¹⁵ Excessive preoccupation with the central hero has bedeviled too much discussion of Greek Tragedy. This problem sometimes rises to the level of unintentional humor, as in the case of those who would puzzle over whether to regard Heracles or Deianeira

this version of the myth Heracles' death on the funeral pyre atop Mt. Oeta is viewed as a purifying fire, but without a hint of apotheosis. Theocritus (*Id.* 24.82–83) moves toward the alternate version in describing Heracles as purged of the mortal element, inherited from his mother, on a Trachinian pyre so that he would, as an immortal, dwell in the house of his father Zeus. Seneca's *Hercules Oetaeus* centers upon the later, dominant version which stresses Hercules' apotheosis through the purifying fire. The chorus (lines 135–37) furnishes a description of Trachis, which is hot, dry, and parched irrespective of the Herculean pathos of love associated with it:

ad Trachinia vocor, saxa rigentia
et dumeta iugis horrida torridis,
vix gratum pecori montivago nemus.

Later (line 195) Iole herself uses the roughness of the region to describe her own feelings: *resonetque malis aspera Trachin*. In Seneca's *Troades* (line 818) the chorus' reference to *lapidosa Trachin* recalls the words of Iole.

Another account of fractured love which centers upon Trachis is the Ovidian story of Ceyx, Trachinian monarch, and his too regal wife, Alcyone.¹⁶ In this narrative (*Met.* 11.627) the goddess Iris commemoratively refers to the region as *Herculea Trachine*. A variation on this last phrasing is offered by Lucan (3.177–78) in his description of the Greek troops which left home to aid Pompey: *liquit . . . Herculeam miles Trachinius Oeten*.

Since I have argued at some length that the Catullan manuscript reading *Trinacria rupes* is not supportable from the meagre evidence of borrowings, I am obliged to insist that I do not propose to support the reading *Trachinia rupes* on the same basis. The clearest argument for the proposed emendation is geographical. Since the word at issue

as the focus of the *Trachiniae*. T. F. Hoey ("The *Trachiniae* and Unity of Hero," *Arethusa* 3 [1970] 1–22) partially resolves this particular problem when he suggests that we might read the play "as the tragedy of a house." The unrepresented elements then become lesser characters, the chorus, and the setting. It was not out of caprice that Sophocles named this play the *Trachiniae*.

¹⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.410–748. See also Statius, *Silvae* 3.57–58.

occurs in a literary context, I have tried to illustrate the geographical probability from literary sources. Once the geographical appropriateness of *Trachinia* is accepted, however, it becomes possible to argue on an *a fortiori* basis that *Trachinia* is an allusively potent reference. Catullus' intention is to declare how painfully he was "scorched" by love. The simile he uses to intensify his declaration is filled with graphical references to the same area: the Trachinian cliffs, Mt. Oeta, the Gulf of Malia, the pass of Thermopylae. If we are prepared to accept that Catullus has chosen to use a geographically consistent simile rather than to read into it the inconsistent, jarring intrusion of a reference to Sicily, we can briefly refer to the more interesting question, in what does the allusive potency of the passage consist? There are three possibilities. None is obscure, and any or all of them may have been in the mind of Catullus. The first is geographical; the ecological character of the region is easily identifiable with Catullus' psychological and emotional state. The second possibility is military. Herodotus, Thucydides and others describe the military role of the region. Trachis and its environs were subjected to an embattled condition as surely as was Catullus' spirit. The third possibility pertains to the mythological and literary associations of the region. The strongest associations center upon Heracles/Hercules, hero and god, with whose love-torments Catullus may have wished to associate himself. The popularity of the tradition in both Greek and Roman literature would readily support this possibility. The Ceyx and Alcyone pathos of love was a less popular myth in Greek and Roman traditions, but popular nonetheless. That Catullus intends to suggest this tradition does not seem very likely, but it is conceivable.¹⁷

I propose, then, the removal of an anomaly by what Maas labels, I suppose with a smile, "a self-evident emendation."¹⁸ The context denies *Trinacria* as a pointless violation of intrinsic probability. *Trachinia* is the reading dictated by the context. The norm of transcriptional probability becomes in this instance an unnecessary exercise in rationalization. The major point to be noted in this regard—not so

¹⁷ The tradition of Ceyx and Alcyone is traced briefly by Brooks Otis, *Ovid As an Epic Poet* (Cambridge 1966) Appendix 16, 392–94. See also his excellent discussion of the myth's realization, pp. 231–77.

¹⁸ Paul Maas, *Textual Criticism* (tr. B. Flower, Oxford 1958) 11.

much to justify the emendation as to illustrate the easy error which produced *Trinacria*—is that the problem of representing Greek aspirates was a particularly vexing one in orthography. In similar fashion the metathesis which has occurred is quite understandable in the case of Greek proper names.