A TE IN CATULLUS POEM 50: A PUN

In Catullus 50, after an enjoyable day writing poetry with Licinius Calvus,
the poet warns his friend not to ignore him lest Nemesis punish him for it,
ne poenas Nemesis reposcat a te ('lest Nemesis demand punishment from
you'). It will be proposed in this article that, in keeping with neoteric ideals,
Catullus is playing on the phrase *a te* to create a bilingual pun on the Greek
word ἄτη 'delusion', 'mental blindness (often divinely sent)'.

> *nunc audax cave sis, precesque nostras,*
> *oramus, cave despuas, ocelle,*
> *ne poenas Nemesis reposcat a te.*
> *est vemens dea: laedere hanc caveto.* (Catull. 50, 18–21)

Now be careful that you're not too rash and, I beg you,
Don't reject my prayers, my darling,
Lest Nemesis demand punishment from you.
The goddess is violent, beware of offending her.

Wordplay and punning in the poems of Catullus have been the
subject of scholarly discussion for over a century.[1] It is well established
that Catullus fills many of his poems with humour and playfulness and
Poem 50 is, of course, no different.[2] After an enjoyable day writing

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[1] E. Harrison, 'Catullus, LXXXIV', *CR* 29 (1915), 198–9; B. Latta, 'Zu Catulls Carmen 1',
MH 29 (1972), 201–13; R. Hunter, *The Shadow of Callimachus. Studies in the Reception of
Hellenistic Poetry at Rome* (Cambridge, 2006), 107 n. 57; J. Ferriss, 'Catullus Poem 71: Another
Foot Pun', *CPh* 104 (2009), 376–84; K. Muse, 'Fleecing Remus' Magnanimous Playboys:
Wordplay in Catullus 58.5', *Hermes* 137 (2009), 302–13; R. Cowan, 'Boring Ipsitilla: Bilingual
Wordplay in Catullus 32', *MH* 70 (2013), 190–8.

[2] K. Quinn, *The Catullan Revolution* (Melbourne, 1959), 55–8; C. J. Fordyce, *Catullus. A
Commentary* (Oxford, 1961), 215; C. Segal, 'Catullan "Otiosi": The Lover and the Poet', *G&R*
17 (1970), 25–31; D. L. Burgess, 'Catullus c. 50: The Exchange of Poetry', *AJPh* 107 (1983),
576–86; M. Pasco-Pranger, 'Sustaining Desire: Catullus 50, Gallus and Propertius 1.10', *CQ*
59 (2009), 142–6.

poetry with Licinius Calvus, Catullus warns his friend not to ignore him lest Nemesis punish him for it. Catullus' recollections of the learned and witty poetic games that the two were playing on the previous day act as an appropriate backdrop for the poet to play his own sophisticated wordplay in the poem. It is proposed that in line 20 Catullus is playing on the words *a te* to create a pun on the Greek word ἄτη 'delusion', 'mental blindness (often divinely sent)', linking the word with the *daimonic* nature of Nemesis and the *poenas* 'punishments' that she exacts.

In the seventeenth century, the scholars Meleager and Vossius both proposed reading the text as Atē/Ἄτη, rather than the now established *a te* 'from you'.[3] Their suggestions gained no traction in the subsequent centuries, with no modern commentary (to my knowledge) even acknowledging the possibility of the alternative interpretation.[4] The only instance where someone potentially read the line in accordance with Meleager and Vossius is Quinn, who translates Catullus 50.20 as 'lest *avenging* Nemesis exact her retribution'.[5] But, neither in his monograph nor in his commentary does Quinn note the ambiguity of the Latin phrase *a te* and its similarity with the Greek ἄτη, in spite of his translation. It is important to note that if we entertain the validity of the textual ambiguity in line 20 of the poem, it is possible to see that Catullus may in fact be punning on the similarity between the Latin phrase *a te* and the Greek goddess of retribution, Atē/Ἄτη. Neither Meleager nor Vossius, however, suggest that this is a pun, and surely we would be doing Catullus an injustice were we not open to the possibility – or even probability – that a double meaning in one of his poems is intentional.

The ἄτη/*a te* wordplay falls into the category of *paronomasia* or 'sound imitation', which works on hearing similar sounds.[6] The subtlety of the pun is enhanced because *a te* is a disyllabic word group with a single accent,[7] which helps to convey the idea of a single word and this is, of course, what we have with the Greek word ἄτη. The pun even

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[3] I. Meleager, 'Spicilegium Iani Meleagri Germani in C. Valerii Catulli Librum Carminum', in I. Gebhardus (ed.), *Iani Gebhardi in Catullum, Tibullum, Propertium Animadversiones cum Jani Meleagri in C. Valerium Catullum Spicilegio* (Hanoviae, 1618), 12–35; I. Vossius, *Cajus Valerius Catullus Et in eum Isaaci Vossii Observationes* (Londini, 1684).

[4] For instance, R. Ellis, *A Commentary on Catullus* (Oxford, 1876); Fordyce (n. 2); W. Kroll, *C. Valerius Catullus* (Stuttgart, 1968); K. Quinn, *Catullus. The Poems* (London, 1970).

[5] Quinn (n. 2), 56.

[6] See J. O'Hara, *True Names. Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1996), 61–3; P. Barrios-Lech, 'Heads Up', *Mnemosyne* 70 (2017), 681.

[7] Kroll (n. 4), 91; Fordyce (n. 2), 218.

works metrically with the two long vowels in ἄτη being mirrored in the Latin ā tē. The pun at 50.20 can thus be understood and interpreted in two mutually complementary ways. First, the conventional way with the Latin *a te*: 'lest Nemesis demand punishment from you' where *a te* is read 'from you'. While on the other reading ἄτη (lower case), we can also understand the line as: 'lest Nemesis, the spirit of destruction, demand punishment' where *a te* is read as ἄτη, the Greek nominative in apposition with Nemesis.

Nevertheless, a pun is hard to prove. There are no markers in the preceding lines of Poem 50 that indicate the reader should be prepared for the appearance of a pun in line 20, as is often the case.[8] As a result, it is necessary to find other indications that a play on words is being made. Any links between ἄτη and another word will give further credence to the pun, with what Vallet calls the 'semiotic activation' of wordplays,[9] where the hidden meaning of a word or name is hinted at from the wider context. As the word (or goddess when capitalized) for delusion or ruin that is often divinely sent as a punishment, it is worth considering the connection between ἄτη and two other words in the line: Nemesis and *poenas*, which both share similarities in meaning and nature with ἄτη and, through their shared characteristics, support the idea that a play on words is being employed by Catullus.

The earliest examples of a semantic link between ἄτη and *poenas* ('punishments') are found in Homer. In the *Iliad*, ἄτη can be interpreted as either the delusion or mental blindness that affects a person's ability to make correct decisions, with damage or punishment as the resulting objective consequence. Alternatively, ἄτη can also be interpreted as the resulting consequence or punishment itself.[10] Those affected by ἄτη see it as something sent by the gods. During the reconciliation of Achilles and Agamemnon, Agamemnon rises to speak and denies culpability for taking Achilles' *geras* ('prize of honour'), Briseis, blaming Zeus, Fate (*Moira*), and Erinys for sending Ἄτη (a blindness) upon him to lead him to this error (of taking Briseis) (Hom. *Il*. 19. 87–94). In the eyes of Agamemnon, ἄτη leads him to his error of taking Briseis, and he is

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[8] R. Maltby, 'The Limits of Etymologising', *Aevum Antiquum* 6 (1993), 257–75; R. Cowan, 'How's Your Father? A Recurrent Bilingual Wordplay in Martial', *CQ.* 65 (2015), 736–46.

[9] D. Vallat, 'Bilingual Word-play on Personal Names in Martial', in J. Booth and R. Maltby (eds.), *What's in a Name? The Significance of Proper Names in Classical Latin Literature* (Swansea, 2006), 121–43.

[10] F. Geisser, *Götter, Geister und Dämonen: Unheilsmächte bei Aischylos - Zwischen Aberglauben und Theatralik* (München, Leipzig, 2002), 81–92.

(and the Greeks as a whole are) punished as a result. In another example, from Book 16, ἄτη is connected with the death of Patroclus and the blindness that comes over his mind shortly before. The blindness that overcomes Patroclus is a punishment sent by Apollo seemingly for threatening to capture the city of Troy. After Patroclus ignores Apollo's warning to fall back from the city (Hom. *Il*. 16.707–9), not long afterwards the god breaks Patroclus' corselet and brings ἄτη ('delusion') upon him. This comes after Patroclus is struck by the spear thrown by Euphorbus and indirectly leads him to face and be killed by Hector (Hom. *Il*. 16.805). In both examples, ἄτη acts as a delusory state sent by the gods which brings about unwelcome or undesired events and consequences.

There are examples in Greek tragedy of a connection between ἄτη and punishment. They are seen explicitly in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy,[11] most clearly when Clytemnestra speaks after killing Agamemnon, justifying her actions.[12] She says (Aesch. *Ag*. 1431–3): καὶ τήνδ᾽ ἀκούεις ὁρκίων ἐμῶν θέμιν: | μὰ τὴν τέλειον τῆς ἐμῆς παιδὸς Δίκην, | Ἄτην Ἐρινύν θ᾽, αἷσι τόνδ᾽ ἔσφαξ᾽ ἐγώ ('Listen also to this, the righteous sanction of my oath: by Justice, exacted for my child, by Atē and by the Erinys, to whom I have sacrificed this man'). Here Aeschylus overtly connects Ἄτη with justice and the avenging Erinys who brings punishments. This connection is not a one-off and is picked up in the *Libation Bearers*. Orestes calls on Zeus as the god who sends late-avenging ἄτη against the wicked and violent (Aesch. *Cho*. 382–5): Ζεῦ Ζεῦ, κάτωθεν ἀμπέμπων | ὑστερόποινον ἄταν | βροτῶν τλάμονι καὶ πανούργῳ | χειρὶ ('Zeus, Zeus, you who send late-avenging retribution up from below to the reckless and wicked deeds done by the hands of mortals'). The similarity between Orestes' words and Clytemnestra's is highlighted by the choice of adjective (ὑστερόποινον) Orestes uses to describe ἄτη, because it is the same word used of the late-avenging Erinys at the start of the *Agamemnon* (Aesch. *Ag*. 58–9). These examples strengthen the relationship between ἄτη, retribution, and punishments. The inherent connection between ἄτη and punishment clearly visible in both Homer and Aeschylus demonstrates that the link between the two

words was well established in the literary tradition by the time Catullus also makes the link in Poem 50.

Let us now consider the semantic link between Nemesis, the goddess of retribution, punishments and Atē/Ἄτη. Hesiod draws the connection between Nemesis and the punishment of men (Hes. *Th.* 223–4): τίκτε δὲ καὶ Νέμεσιν πῆμα θνητοῖσι βροτοῖσι | Νὺξ ὀλοή ('Also deadly Night gives birth to Nemesis (Indignation) to afflict mortal men'); and this is also implied by Pindar, (Pind. *Pyth.* 10.42–5): πόνων δὲ καὶ μαχᾶν ἄτερ | οἰκέοισι φυγόντες | ὑπέρδικον Νέμεσιν ('Without toil or battles they live without fear of strict Nemesis'). Hesiod soon after presents a familial connection between Nemesis and Ἄτη with the latter being the child of Strife, who is a sibling of Nemesis (Hes. *Th.* 223–30). Though a little later than Catullus, Ovid presents an interesting example of the connection between ἄτη, Nemesis, and *poenas*: *exigit a dignis ultrix Rhamnusia poenas* ('the avenging Rhamnusian goddess [Nemesis] exacts punishment on those who deserve it') (Ov. *Tr.* 5.8.9).[13] The presence of the qualifier *ultrix* 'avenging' brings to mind the idea of vengeance and the relationship between ἄτη and the Erinys in Aeschylus seen above. While ἄτη is not mentioned explicitly by Ovid, it is worth noting again that Quinn translates Catullus 50.20 as 'lest *avenging* Nemesis exact her retribution', which implies either that he read *a te* as ἄτη, or ignored *a te* in his translation and took it as assumed.[14] Either way, it may be the case that he had in mind Ovid's *ultrix Rhamnusia* 'the avenging Rhamnusian goddess (Nemesis)' when translating Catullus 50. Though this is arguably a tangential example, Quinn's translation further demonstrates the close semantic relationship that exists between ἄτη, Nemesis, and punishments. As we saw with ἄτη/Ἄτη and punishment, there is a tradition that connects ἄτη with Nemesis and punishment in literature before Catullus, as well as after. The lexical field of the line, the well-established usage of ἄτη/Ἄτη in conjunction with Nemesis and punishments in Greek literature, suggests at the very least the possibility of Catullus utilizing this tradition to create a pun in Poem 50.

If we turn our attention to how the textual amendments of Meleager and Vossius should be read, the line would have two nominatives: the

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[13] For the significance of Nemesis as punisher of pride and jilted lovers, see: Burgess (n. 2), 585; E. Stafford, 'Tibullus' Nemesis: Divine Retribution and the Poet', in Booth and Maltby (n. 9), 40–3.

[14] Quinn (n. 2), 56.

goddess Nemesis and the goddess Atē/Ἄτη (note the capitalization). We are perhaps to understand Nemesis as having a double name 'Nemesis Atē'. This is not an impossible reading as Nemesis, goddess of retribution, is aligned in nature with Atē, who is also connected with just punishment (in the form of delusion, blindness, or otherwise) often wrought by Zeus and the gods. While not impossible, as both are similar goddesses, they are however not the same, as is attestable from cult worship. Nemesis is widely known to have been worshipped at Rhamnous and Smyrna,[15] but we have no such evidence for Atē/Ἄτη being worshipped as a goddess. So, while the reading is possible, it is not wholly desirable, which may help explain why the textual amendment has not been adopted by subsequent commentators or editors since. It is suggested here that if we read ἄτη (lower case), in favour of Atē/Ἄτη, we may have more success. Rather than being a related goddess, ἄτη, as a noun rather than a proper noun, acts as an epithet or qualifier to describe the nature of the goddess Nemesis – a quality that is in keeping with the goddess' nature, as the bringer of ruin or destruction, which is justly wrought. Indeed, if we understand ἄτη (lower case), then the lack of capitalization has the benefit of adding to the visual similarity between the Greek and Latin words.

There is a precedent for bilingual wordplay in Catullus, which strengthens the case for seeing a pun on *a te*/ἄτη. For example, in Poem 1, *lepidus* echoes the Greek and notably Callimachean vocabulary λεπτός/λεπτότης.[16] While *lepidus* ('charming') and λεπτός/λεπτότης ('thinness; fineness, delicacy') are not synonyms, they do exhibit similar connotations, which allow for the reader to see wordplay at work. In a comparable fashion, while ἄτη and Nemesis and *poenas* are not synonyms, they are of a related semantic field. It is also worth noting that – just as with *a te*/ἄτη – *lepidus* is not signposted.

Further examples can also be cited. In Poem 32, it has been suggested that Catullus is punning on the name Ipsitilla and the hapax ἴψ ('woodworm').[17] Cowan argues that the poet's erect penis bores through his cloak at the end of the poem in the same way the woodworm, ἴψ, bores through material. In Poem 84, Catullus mocks

[15] L. R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, 5 volumes (Oxford, 1896–1909), 494–6; W. Burkert (trans. J. Raffan), *Greek Religion. Archaic and Classical* (Oxford, 1985), 185; M. B. Hornum, *Nemesis, the Roman State, and the Games* (Leiden, 1993), 6–10.

[16] Latta (n. 1), 201–13; T. P. Wiseman, *Clio's Cosmetics. Three Studies in Greco-Roman Literature* (Leicester, 1979), 169–70.

[17] Cowan (n. 1), 190–8.

Arrius' lisping or overly aspirated pronunciation of the Ionian Sea, seemingly whipping the sea into a foamy state by calling it 'Hionios'. This brings to mind the Greek word χιονέους ('snowy'), and is marked by *horribilis* ('dreadful') in line 10.[18] Two more bilingual puns can be found in Poem 68, where *eros* in line 76 ('lords/masters') can be read as the Greek ἔρως ('love'), marked by *amore* ('love') in line 73; likewise, in line 116 *Hebe nec longa virginitate foret* ('and that Hebe might not remain a virgin for a long time') could imply the Greek ἥβη ('bloom of youth'), which is appropriate for a line concerned with a girl's loss of virginity.[19] The latter example is especially noteworthy as a pun for the current discussion, because it is not marked in the previous lines of the poem – though it is within line 116 by *virginitate*, just as ἄτη is by Nemesis and *poenas* in line 20, but not in the previous lines of the poem. Cowan advises that 'the temptation to see wordplay wherever there is a – perhaps random – coincidence of sound should be resisted, unless there is at least something which prompts the reader (or listener) to detect a pun'.[20] So, with this warning in mind, it seems reasonable to say that *a tē*/ἄτη, just as *Hebe*/ἥβη, is marked by the lexical field of the line within which it is situated. While of a different sort from the bilingual wordplays cited above, we can cite additional examples of Catullan puns.[21] Thus the frequency with which Catullus employs wordplay elsewhere only increases the likelihood of a pun in Poem 50.

The *a tē*/ἄτη pun is supported, then, by the complementary meaning of Nemesis and *poenas*; by the common sound and metre of the Latin and Greek words; by the fact that Catullus employs bilingual (and other) puns and wordplays in many of his poems; and by the spirit in which we cannot help approaching the works of great poets. Furthermore, the pun is apt for the nature of the poem, because the

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[18] Harrison (n. 1), 198–9.

[19] Hunter (n. 1), 107 n. 57.

[20] Cowan (n. 8), 738.

[21] Ferriss (n. 1), 377, argues convincingly that in Poem 71 *podagra* not only means 'gout' but also 'metrical incompetence'. Quinn (n. 4), 139, points out that there is also the instance of punning on *pes* 'foot', seen in Poem 14: *abite illuc, unde malum pedem attulistis* ('go away back to where you brought your faulty feet from'), where the idea of the 'physical foot' works as well as the idea of 'poorly written poetry/meter'. In addition, as suggested by Martial 11.6, there is the famous *passerem Catulli*, which has been argued for as a pun, where the *passer* of Catullus 2 and 3 might mean 'penis' rather than (or in addition to) 'sparrow'. For this last example, see R. W. Hooper, 'In Defence of Catullus' Dirty Sparrow', *G&R* 32 (1985), 162–78.

intellectual, playful atmosphere of Poem 50 provides a suitable context for Catullus' sophisticated bilingual wordplay.

SIMON TRAFFORD

Chislehurst & Sidcup Grammar School, UK

simon.trafford@csgrammar.com