

Improving the Alliteration: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.376

One of Ovid's most admired descriptive passages is his account of the Lycian peasants after Latona has transformed them into frogs (*Met.* 6.370-376)¹:

iuuat esse sub undis 370
 et modo tota caua submergere membra palude,
 nunc proferre caput, summo modo gurgite nare,
 saepe super ripam stagni consistere, saepe
 in gelidos resilire lacus; sed nunc quoque turpes
 litibus exercent linguas pulsoque pudore, 375
 quamuis sint sub aqua, sub aqua maledicere temptant.

376 sub aqua²] linguis FL semper d

As Bömer (partly quoting Herter) puts it, “‘Die glänzende Lautmalerei in dem berühmten Verse 376’ . . . ist wohl die bekannteste Onomatopoiie des Dichters”².

There is a small interpretative problem in the famous line. The phrasing, with *quamuis* and the subjunctive, might be taken to suggest that the frogs are attempting to curse while they are entirely underwater. This would certainly help to make their voices unintelligible, and Dante seems to have understood the line this way, if he was thinking of this passage when he wrote his own description of the sullen (“tristi”) bubbling beneath the muddy water in *Inferno* VII.117-126. However, it is clear that the curses of Ovid's frogs come out as croaks not because they are uttered underwater, but because the metamorphosed Lycians no longer possess human vocal powers in or out of the water: there can surely be no implication that frogs are capable of articulate speech so long as their mouths are above water-level. If *quamuis sint sub aqua* means ‘although they now live in the water’ rather than ‘however far under the water they may be at any given time’, should

¹ My text and the pertinent line of the apparatus are quoted from W. S. Anderson's Teubner edition (Leipzig 1977).

² F. Bömer (ed.), *P. Ovidius Naso, Metamorphosen, Buch VI-VII* (Heidelberg 1976), *ad loc.* In *Ovid Recalled* (Cambridge 1955), L. P. Wilkinson, while noting that onomatopoeia is quite rare in the *Metamorphoses*, calls this instance “admirable” (236).

not *sint* be *sunt*³)? My suggestion is not utterly unprecedented. Although twentieth-century editors generally omit to mention the fact, two of Heinsius' manuscripts read *sunt*⁴.

Finally, it seems to me at least possible that we should go one step further and that what Ovid wrote was neither *quamuis sint* nor *quamuis sunt* but *quamquam sunt*⁵. In addition to clarifying the meaning, this would have the further advantage of adding one more *qua* to the croaking alliteration, with *quamquam sunt sub aqua, sub aqua maledicere temptant* clearly implying the frogs' *qua(m)qua(m) . . . qua . . . qua*⁶. Given the insubstantial nature of final *m* in Latin, there would have been little difference between the sounds of the double *quam* at the beginning of the line and the repeated *-qua* in the middle⁷. It is worth emphasizing that *quamquam*, with two croaks in one disyllabic word, is more compactly alliterative than *sub aqua, sub aqua*, where the two croaks are spread over four words and six syllables⁸. Of course, the added croak in the second syllable of *quamquam*, not having an ictus, will be less striking than the other three, but every little bit helps. Indeed, with another poet, this degree of alliteration might be

³ Although the distinction between *quamuis* with the subjunctive ('to whatever degree') and *quamquam* with the indicative ('although') had become blurred by the time of Ovid, who uses each word with either meaning and either mood, an indicative would certainly help the reader understand what is going on. Corruption of *sunt* to *sint* would have been very easy, and could have come either from the scribe misunderstanding the lines as referring to the frogs bubbling underwater, or from the fact that *quamuis* is so often used with the subjunctive.

⁴ It is to be found neither in Anderson, nor in H. Magnus (ed.), *P. Ovidi Nasonis Metamorphoseon Libri XV* (Berlin 1914), nor in D. A. Slater, *Towards a Text of the Metamorphosis of Ovid* (Oxford 1927). My information is taken from the edition of P. Burman (Amsterdam 1727), who also reports that Heinsius proposed emending *sint* to *nent*.

⁵ *Quamquam* (with the indicative) has been corrupted to *quamuis* at *E.P.* 3.5.17 and 4.3.11, though in the latter passage (*ille ego sum, quamquam non uis audire, uetusta / paene puer puero iunctus amicitia*), the following *uis* will have done much to encourage the corruption. The opposite error, *quamquam* for *quamuis* (again with the indicative), is found in one MS (Anderson's **p**) at *Met.* 8.814.

⁶ With a longer first word followed by two separate monosyllables, this is not entirely unlike Aristophanes' canonical frog-sound *brekekek□x ko!x ko!x* (*Ranae* 209 ff.). In his edition of the play (Oxford 1993), 219, K. J. Dover provides information on the likely species, along with a phonetic transcription and thoughts as to why Aristophanes has added the initial *br* and final *x*, which are not pronounced by actual frogs.

⁷ Evidence for the pronunciation of final *m* as the 'mere nasalization of the preceding vowel' (though it also lengthens short vowels) is given in W. S. Allen, *Vox Latina* (Cambridge 1978²), 30-31.

⁸ In a description of the rivalry between croaking frogs and what we must surely call 'cawing' birds, the author of the *Culex* uses the one Latin word which is arguably even more suited to both than *quamquam*: *et quaquu geminas auium uox obstrepit auris, / hac querulae referunt uoces, quis nantia limo / corpora lymphu fouet* (150-152).

thought a bit much, but with Ovid, who, as the Elder Seneca put it, *nescit quod bene cessit relinquere* (*Con.* 9.5.17), we need not worry about making him go too far.