

**Giovanni Pontano,
First Naenia and Second Iambic
(edited by Paul Gwynne)**

Giovanni Gioviano Pontano (1429-1503) had a long and prosperous career at the Aragonese court of Naples, where he worked as political adviser, military secretary and ultimately as chancellor. He founded an academy for the meetings of learned and distinguished men which became the centre of erudition in the southern capital, and continued to thrive long after its founder's death. In 1461 he married Adriana Sassone, who bore him one son and three daughters to all of whom he was passionately devoted. The first poem is one of twelve lullabies composed by him for his little son Lucio Francesco (born 21 March 1469). The poems were discovered among Pontano's papers when he died and were published posthumously in 1505 as a part of three books of elegies *De amore coniugali*. In these verses Pontano expresses his devotion to his wife and family. The verse is elegiac couplets and is replete with vocatives and diminutives that give the song a gentle, rocking rhythm unexpected in Latin verse. While these are not in themselves unusual, as Leo Spitzer (p.132) has observed, 'it is their frequency alone that is unclassical, devised as they are to produce the same lulling effect of musical monotony as do the repetition of words (*veni venias*)'. Despite the seeming simplicity of the verse there are some constructions that require attention and explanation.

The text is taken from Giovanni Gioviano Pontano, *Poesie Latine*, ed L. Monti Sabia, Turin 1977, vol.1, pp.176-7.

For further discussions of Pontano, see Carol Kidwell, *Pontano: poet and prime minister*, London 1991, pp.99-102; *Renaissance Latin Verse*, ed. by A. Perosa and J. Sparrow,

London 1979, pp.74-76; L. Spitzer, 'The problem of Latin Renaissance poetry', *Studies in the Renaissance*, II (1955), pp.118-38.

The second poem has been chosen for contrast. It was written some thirty years later mourning Lucio's premature death (24 August 1498). He was just twenty-nine years old and left a widow and a seven-week old baby daughter. It is to his new granddaughter that Pontano addresses these moving verses. The verse is iambic trimeter, which was pre-eminently the meter of Greek tragic dialogue. Its proximity to ordinary speech enhances the drama of Pontano's complaint. As in the lullaby the poem is replete with diminutives but the effect here is quite different and adds to the pathos of Pontano's complaint to his little granddaughter.

The text has been taken from *Renaissance Latin Verse*, ed. by A. Perosa and J. Sparrow, published by Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd. in 1979, p.83. Permission has been granted by the publishers to reproduce this text.

Naenia Prima ad Somnum Provocandum

Somne, veni; tibi Luciolus blanditur ocellis:

somne, veni, venias, blandule somne, veni.

Luciolus tibi dulce canit, somne, optime somne:

somne, veni, venias, blandule somne, veni.

Luciolus vocat in thalamos te, blandule somne,

5

somnule dulcicule, blandule somnicule,

Ad cunas te Luciolus vocat: huc, age, somne,

somne, veni ad cunas, somne, age, somne, veni.

Accubitum te Luciolus vocat, eia age, somne,

eia age, somne, veni, noctis amice, veni.

10

Luciolus te ad pulvinum vocat, instat ocellis:

somne, veni, venias, eia age, somne, veni.

Luciolus te in complexum vocat, innuit ipse,

innuit: en venias, en modo, somne veni.

Venisti, bone somne, boni pater alme soporis,

15

qui curas hominum corporaque aegra levas.

The first Lullaby to bring on Sleep.

Come Sleep, little Lucio allures you with his little eyes, come Sleep, come, gentle Sleep, come. Little Lucio is sweetly singing for you, Sleep, deep Sleep: come Sleep, come, gentle Sleep, come. Little Lucio is calling you to his room, gentle Sleep, sweet little Sleep, gentle little Sleep. Little Lucio is calling you to the cradle, come on here Sleep, Sleep, come to the cradle, Sleep, come on Sleep, come. Little Lucio is calling you to lie nearby, ah come on, Sleep, ah come on, Sleep, come, Night-time's friend, come. Little Lucio calls you to his pillow, he insists with his little eyes; come Sleep, come, gentle Sleep, come. Little Lucio calls you into his embrace, he himself nods, he nods: come on, come on now, come Sleep. You have come, good Sleep, sweet father of good slumbers, who lighten the cares and tired limbs of men.

Commentary

Title: *Naenia*: usually *nenia*, any mournful song, here a lullaby, cf. Italian ‘*far la ninna nanna*’ lit. ‘to hum tune while rocking a child to sleep’.

ad provocandum: gerundive to express purpose.

Line 1: *Somme*: vocative of *Somnus*, Sleep personified

Luciolus: diminutive of *Lucius*.

ocellis: diminutive of *oculus*.

Line 2: *venias*: present subjunctive to express command

Line 4: *blandule*: diminutive and vocative.

Line 6: *dulcicule*: diminutive and vocative.

somnicule: diminutive and vocative.

Line 9: *accubitus*: supine to express purpose.

Line 16: *curas*: ambiguous, either present indicative or feminine accusative plural, translate either, ‘you who cure and lighten the tired limbs of men’ or ‘who lighten the cares and tired limbs of men’. There is no major change to the poem’s sense either way.

Iambi II: Conqueritur de Lucii filii morte cum Tranquilla nepte.

Senii levamen unicum, neptis, mei,

Ubi est pater tuus, misella, mortuum

Quem nescias, misella, nec iam sentias

Aetate in ista primula, dieculis

Paucissimis e matris alvulo edita, 5

Rubicundula et nutricis alludens sinu?

Heu, heu, genus hominum caducum et languidum

In germine ipso: vitae in ipso limine

Puer interit, natum senex effert pater,

Avus patrem tuum, misella neptula, 10

Et ipsa patrem infantula in cunabulis.

Vivitque avus confectus annis, ipsaque in

Crepundiis vagis, mali tui inscia

Sortisque venturae. Dolor, dolor adigit

Avum, patrem senemque sorte de hac queri. 15

Miseram senectutem meam, miserum senem!

At tu, misella, forte avum si amiseris,

Hoc destituta vinculo aresces, velut

Crescens amaracus, liquore si suo

Suoque sole non alatur, interit. 20

Iambic II: With his granddaughter Tranquilla he mourns the death of his son

Lucio.

Granddaughter, the only consolation of my old age, where is your father, unfortunate little girl? He is dead, he whom you may never get to know, unfortunate little girl, and you don't understand right now, at the very beginning of your life, a very few little days old, just emerged from your mother's little womb, a rosy little creature and playing around on your nurse's lap. Alas, alas, the feeble and frail race of men, in his very flowering, on the very threshold of life the boy dies, an old man, a father buries his son, the grandfather buries your father, unfortunate dear little granddaughter, and you yourself a little infant in the cradle bury your father. And your grandfather lives on, worn down by his years, and you yourself cry in your earliest childhood, unaware of your misfortune and your future destiny. Grief, grief drives the grandfather on, father and old man to complain about his lot in life. O my miserable old age, miserable old man! But you unfortunate little girl, if you should perhaps lose your grandfather, robbed of this bond, you will wither just like marjoram, if it is not nourished by its own water and its own sunlight as it grows, dies.

Commentary

Line 2: *misella*: diminutive, here used throughout both for affection (i.e. to emphasize the bond between Pontano and his granddaughter) and to stress her tender age.

Line 4: *primula*: diminutive.

dieculis: diminutive, cf. the effect with *paucissimis* in the following line.

Line 5: *avuluo*: diminutive.

Line 6: *rubicundula*: diminutive.

Line 10: *neptula*: diminutive.

Line 11: *infantula*: diminutive.

cunabulis: diminutive.

Line 12: in *crepundiis*: either ‘among your baby toys’ (i.e. rattles) or ‘in your earliest childhood’.

Line 16: exclamatory accusatives. These emphasize the author’s sense of helplessness.

Line 19: *amaracus*: marjoram. The fragrant herb is connected with both love and remembrance. The reference here is probably to Virgil’s description of Aeneas’ son *Iulus* being lulled to sleep by Venus in a bed of marjoram (*Aeneid*, I, 693).

