

# The Plinian Dolphin: Johann Matthias Gesner (1691–1761), *Carmina*

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## Introduction

The German classicist Johann Matthias Gesner, Latinized *Jo. Matthias Gesnerus* (9 April 1691 – 3 August 1761), was one of the essential pioneers of the so-called ‘new humanism’, developing progressive forms of teaching classical languages and literature. Being an inspiring teacher, he produced scholarly editions of works by ancient authors, and he started to compile a Latin dictionary based on principles partly mirrored in today’s *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*. Gesner had a formative influence on the establishment of the newly founded Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen (Niedersachsen, Germany) and its library. In addition to all this activity, he wrote occasional poetry from his youth, some of which was published.<sup>1</sup>

Gesner (born in Roth near Nürnberg) came from a not particularly wealthy family; since his talent was spotted early, he received a thorough education, initially with the help of his stepfather and then supported by scholarships and initiatives of individuals. Already as a student at the university of Jena (in eastern Germany), he published occasional poetry as well as his first philological work *Philopatris dialogus Lucianeus*, demonstrating that the piece *Philopatris* attributed to the Greek writer Lucian could not have been written by him. In this period Gesner’s mentor was the theologian Johann Franz Buddeus, who furthered his academic activities and then recommended the young man for the post of deputy headmaster at a grammar school in Weimar in 1715. In Weimar Gesner also assumed responsibility for the Duke’s collection of coins and his library, the future Herzogin-Anna-Amalia-Bibliothek. That Gesner was able to obtain this position at the palace of Duke Wilhelm Ernst was due to the intervention of Buddeus and then Friedrich Gotthilf von Marschall called Greiff, later a friend of his. After the Duke’s death in 1728 Marschall was removed from his office; then Gesner was relieved of his duties as librarian. He therefore left Weimar for Ansbach, to be a teacher at his former school; soon afterwards (1729) he was appointed headmaster of

the Thomasschule in Leipzig, where he reformed the school rules and the curriculum. The composer Johann Sebastian Bach, a teacher of music at that school, is said to have been delighted at Gesner's arrival.

As the professors at the university of Leipzig did not allow Gesner to teach at the university, he left Leipzig when the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen was founded on the initiative of King George II (named after him).<sup>2</sup> Gesner was one of the first professors to arrive in 1734: he was appointed professor of poetry and eloquence and also became director of the library; he subsequently created the *Seminarium Philologicum*, founded the Göttingen branch of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft* and was a member of the *Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* since its foundation in 1751 (serving first as secretary and later as president).

At Gesner's death (in Göttingen) his oeuvre included several editions of ancient authors (e.g. Livy [1735], Quintilian [1738], Pliny the Younger [1739], Horace [1752], Claudian [1759]) as well as pedagogical works. Today it is thought that Gesner's editions of ancient texts were rather traditional and not as progressive as, for instance, the work of his contemporary Richard Bentley (1662–1742) in the United Kingdom, although Gesner correctly argued against the view proposed by another Cambridge Classicist, Jeremiah Markland, that the speeches Cicero delivered after his return from exile were not authentic (see Gesner's *Cicero restitutus*, 1753, 1754). At the same time it is widely acknowledged that Gesner's views on the organization of classical studies at university (especially for the training of future teachers) and his work on lexicography were influential. Generally, Gesner was more interested in historical context and interpretation and less in questions of transmission and textual criticism, and he also felt that the former was relevant for teaching. He outlined his ideas in *Institutiones rei scholasticae* (1715), where he describes what schools should achieve and what universities should teach.<sup>3</sup> For instance, he introduced the distinction between 'statory' and 'cursory' reading (i.e. spending a lot of time on the details of short passages versus reading longer stretches for content) and argued for the latter; he also published anthologies for this purpose (e.g. selections from Cicero [1717], from Pliny the Elder [1723], and from Greek Prose [1731]). He proposed that students training to be teachers should already get experience of school teaching during their studies.

After many years of work and various preliminary works Gesner published the *Novus linguae et eruditionis Romanae Thesaurus* in four volumes in 1749. This dictionary limited itself to ancient sources (excluding medieval and Neo-Latin ones), explained Latin words in Latin, not by translations into the vernacular, and organized individual entries chronologically according to the semantic development of each word. While the combination of factual and linguistic details in entries in the same dictionary was not continued, the

principles for arranging the information on the meaning of words had an influence on the structure of the present-day *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*.<sup>4</sup>

Gesner started writing occasional poetry when he was still young in order to earn money. The numerous poems written during his later career were linked to various occasions; for instance, there are poems in praise of King George or the city of Göttingen.<sup>5</sup> Gesner's occasional poetry includes a series of New Year poems, printed as book 2 entitled *Strenae s. Kalendae Ianuariae*, covering the years 1715 to 1729, in Gesner's *Carminum libri tres* (1743) and later editions. One of these poems (for 1 January 1727), dedicated to Gesner's friend Marschall, is particularly noteworthy since it is the result of a combination of scholarly erudition, enjoyment of poetry and an expression of feelings of friendship for the addressee. The poem was first published in Gesner's edition of the letters of Pliny the Younger (1739), since it responds to one of Pliny's letters (*Ep.* 9.33).<sup>6</sup> It was deemed to be of so much interest that it was included in a selection of Latin poems by recent German poets assembled by John Tobias Rönick in 1749.

In this letter to his friend Caninius Rufus, Pliny the Younger narrates an anecdote about a dolphin, noting that it would be good material for poetic treatment. Gesner takes up this suggestion and produces a poem on the subject; while he says that he had composed it twelve years earlier as a New Year poem,<sup>7</sup> he prints it underneath the text of Pliny's letter among his commentary notes.<sup>8</sup> A short summary of the story can also be found in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder (*Plin.* HN 9.26), a passage included in a section on dolphins in Gesner's edition of selections from this work.<sup>9</sup>

Metre: hexameter

## Notes

- 1 On Gesner's biography, academic activity and writings see esp. Eckstein 1879; Schindel 1964; 1989; 2001a; 2001b: 11–17; Friedrich 1991; Jaumann 2004; Vielberg 2013: 1–26.
- 2 King George II had apparently planned the foundation of a university in Göttingen since summer 1729, along with one of his ministers, Gerlach Adolph von Münchhausen. Plans became more concrete from 1732, and on 14 October 1734 the first lecture took place, followed by the official inauguration on 17 September 1737.
- 3 For a modern edition with German translation and commentary see Vielberg 2013.
- 4 On the 'pre-history' of the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, including Gesner's contribution, see Wick 2012.
- 5 On Gesner's occasional poetry, especially about the city of Göttingen and the university there, see Hays 2004.

- 6 On this letter (with references to earlier scholarship) see Beck 2016.
- 7 See the introduction to the poem in the Pliny edition: *Vtrum fecerit Caninius non dixerim: me certe excitauit Secundus, vt hoc sumerem ante XII annos argumentum carminis, quo honorem haberem veteri meo & literarum omnium in Vinariensi aula Patrono, cui mitem senectutem & beatum in rure suo, in quod recessit, otium, ex animi sententia precor. Licetne illud huc attexere? Et ponamus, monumentum non tam qualiscunque ingenii, quod ad tales ludos paullatim vt par est obdurescit, quam aeternae in virum immortaliter de nobis meritum pietatis. Hoc monumentum tibi, Plini Secunde, qui similes MARSCHALLI mei, & tui ipsius viros viuus complectebare, colebas mortuos, ad omnes posteros seruandum commendamus. Est autem illud carmen, cuius aliquot similia olim nobis nata sunt. Et erunt forte amici quidam, quibus hunc libellum donabimus, ita blandi, vti rogent ea colligi, quibus deinde obtemperatum, in praefatione gloriari modeste possimus: Satisne probaui me poetam? an melius, quam ipso carmine?*
- 8 In Gesner's Pliny edition the poem is connected to letter 9.33 (in line with the modern numbering of the letters), while in the editions of Gesner's poems there is a note after the title referring to letter 9.30 ('Vid. PLIN. Epist. VIII, 30.').
- 9 Plin. HN 9.26: *alius intra hos annos Africo litore Hipponis Diarruti simili modo ex hominum manu vascens praebensque se tractandum et adludens nantibus inpositosque portans unguento perunctus a Flaviano proconsule Africae et sopitus, ut apparuit, odoris novitate fluctuatusque similis exanimi caruit hominum conversatione ut iniuria fugatus per aliquot menses, mox reversus in eodem miraculo fuit. iniuriae potestatem in hospitales ad visendum venientium Hipponenses in necem eius compulerunt.* – Printed in: *Chrestomathia Pliniana oder Auserlesene Stellen aus C. Plinii Secundi Historia naturali, nach den besten Ausgaben Harduini und Ioh. Frid. Gronovii recensiret, hin und wieder verbessert, und weiltäufftig erkläret. Auch mit einem Register versehen von Ioh. Matthia Gesnern, Jena 1723 (p. 400).*

## Bibliography

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### Source of Latin text

*C. Plinii Caecilii Secundi Epistolarum libri decem Gratiarum Actio Panegyricus cum adnotationibus perpetuis Io. Matthiae Gesneri, qui etiam vitam Plinii et indices auctiores emendationesque dedit cum privil. pot. pol. reg. et el. Sax., Lipsiae (Sumtibus Caspari Fritschii) M DCC XXXIX (pp. 418–21).*

The poem is also included (with no textual variants, just minor differences in punctuation and orthographical conventions) in:

*Io. Matthiae Gesneri. Eloq. et. Poes. in Acad. Georgia Aug. P. P. O. Acad. a Biblioth. Seminar. Philol. et Scholar. Maior. Inpsect. [sic] Soc. Reg. Pruss. Sodalis Carminum libri III, Wrocław 1743 (pp. 41–5).*

*Io. Matthiae Gesneri, Eloq. et. Poes. in Acad. Georgia Aug. P. P. O. Acad. a Biblioth. Seminar. Philol. et Scholar. Maior. Inpsect. Soc. Reg. Pruss. Sodalis Opuscula minora. Tomus VIII. Carminum libros III. continens, Wrocław 1745 (pp. 41–5).*

*Recentium poetarum Germanorum carmina Latina selectiora, ex recensione M. Ioannis Tobiae Roenickii, Helmstedt 1749 (pp. 125–9).*

## Latin text

DELPHINVS PLINIANVS  
 ILLVSTRISSIMO HEROI  
 FRID. GOTTHILF  
 MARSCHALLO  
 GRYPHO,  
 IN STRENAE VICEM OBLATVS  
 VINARIAE  
 KAL. IANVAR. A. CIOIOCCXXVII  
 A  
 I. M. G.

- Hoc unum, MARSCHALLE, tuis tibi deerat in hortis,  
 Fons salientis aquae, nymphis sedesque iocusque.  
 Hoc etiam tua cura tibi, an fortuna? parauit.  
 Qua pueros capiunt passo specularia soles*  
 5 *In lunam falcata sinu, qua maximus aestus,  
 Exoritur iam dulce sitisque aestusque leuamen:  
 Lympha salit labro recidens excepta capaci.  
 An patiere, alto qui munera pectore spernis,  
 Piscis vt his in aquis nostro tibi munere ludat?*  
 10 *Accipe, quem prisci commendat gratia saeculi,  
 Quique instar saeculi vel solus, Plinius ille,  
 Traiani decus, atque sui laus unica Comi,  
 Quem primum laudet, cui non ignotus vterque,  
 Si tibi sit similis prisco reuocandus ab aeuo.*  
 15 *Nec metus, vt labri Delphinum angustia magnum  
 Terreat: ille per arentes te laetus arenas,  
 Ille per & montes, & per stabula alta ferarum,  
 Ingentem pietate virum pius ipse sequatur.*

- Monstrorum genitrix terra Afra, Diarrhytos Hippo  
 20 *Qua colitur missis Roma de matre colonis,  
 Humani ah! nimium vidit miracula piscis.  
 Imminet vrbs stagno. hoc vicino e gurgite ponti,  
 (Euripus qualis fluctus vomit atque resorbet)  
 Hauritque infusas vrgentibus aestibus vndas,*  
 25 *Eructatque suum pelago residente liquorem.  
 Nauigat hic omnis populus, varioque natatu*

## English translation

The Plinian Dolphin  
 to the most illustrious champion  
 Frid[rich] Gotthilf  
 Marschall  
 [called] Greiff,  
 offered instead of a New Year present  
 of wine  
 on 1 January in the year 1727  
 by  
 I. M. G.

This one thing, MARSCHALL, was missing in your gardens,  
 a spring of cascading water, a home and an amusement for nymphs.  
 This your care (or a fortunate turn of things?) has provided for you as well.  
 Where the reflective surface catches clear sunshine, in a broad  
 curve formed into the shape of a moon like a sickle, where the heat is  
 greatest, 5  
 there arises now a sweet alleviation of thirst and heat:  
 water rises up, springing back, having been caught in a capacious tub.  
 Will you allow, you who despise gifts with your lofty heart,  
 a fish to play in these waters for you by our gift?  
 Accept him, whom the esteem of a previous century commends, 10  
 and who is like a century even on his own, that Pliny,  
 the ornament of Trajan and the sole glory of his own Comum,  
 who is to be praised first by anyone to whom both [Pliny and Trajan] are  
 not unknown,  
 if he, being similar to you, is to be recalled from a previous age.  
 No fear that the narrowness of the tub might frighten a big Dolphin: 15  
 it shall follow you happily through dry sand  
 and through mountains and through deep lairs of animals,  
 you a man outstanding in piety, pious itself.

The mother of monsters, the African land, Hippo Diarrhytus,  
 which is inhabited by colonists sent from Rome, the mother city, 20  
 ah, saw the miracle of a fish, that was, ah!, too human.  
 The city projects over a lagoon. From the nearby abyss of the sea  
 (just as the Euripus throws up and absorbs floods again)  
 it draws in the wave mixed with pressing heat  
 and spews out again its liquid as the sea settles down. 25  
 The entire people here goes by sea and by various kinds of swimming

- Neptuni pecus exagitat. dubitaueris, alti  
 Imperiumne Iouis, scepra an fraterna sequantur?  
 Non canibus matres hic irascuntur equisue,  
 30 Non trochus exercet, non puluerulenta palaestra,  
 Non cursus, pueros: mare summa & sola voluptas.  
 Exsuperat tam quisque alios, quanto altius aequor  
 Ingressus, litusque simul nantesque reliquit.  
 Huius amore puer reliquis audentior vnus  
 35 Accensus palmae, quae meta suprema laborum  
 Illum erat ante diem, proferre interritus audet.  
 Ipsamque ingreditur Neptuni feruidus aulam  
 Nec tamen haec bilem mouisse audacia regi  
 Creditur. en cara in primis de gente satelles  
 40 Occurrit puero Delphinus, & accipit vltro  
 Aduenientem: & iam videas praeire sequentem,  
 Pergentemque sequi, gyros iam ducere circum,  
 Iamque subire pedes, equitandaque subdere terga,  
 Ponere iam trepidum nouitate, iterumque subire,  
 45 Inque altum ferre, & vestigia flectere retro,  
 Ludentumque gregi laeto sic reddere tandem.  
 Fama exit, non est tota vulgatio vrbe  
 Fabula, confertumque videt lux altera litus,  
 Spectatum veniunt matres, veniuntque puellae:  
 50 Est, quae Delphinum obtendat, lectura tot inter  
 Egregios iuuenes praestanti corpore amicum.  
 Confestim redit ad certamina nota iuuentus.  
 Delphini puer at vector discedere turba  
 Cunctatur, fidei incertus, cautusque pericli,  
 55 Et pauidae parens genitrici. piscis ad horam  
 Praesto est, & puerum cursu designat: at ille  
 Cum reliquis celeri repetit sua litora planta.  
 Delphinus sequitur rapido non ille volatu,  
 Quo, quando vrgetur per Gallica \* retia mugil, [note: Plin. H. N. 9, 8 f. 9.]  
 60 Verum inuitanti similis nutuque vocanti.  
 Exilit hinc, & mergitur hinc, varioque natatu  
 Spumeus implicitat crebros atque expedit orbes.  
 Qualis vbi tenerae Melitaea gente catellus  
 Alludit dominae, refugitque, venitque, caditque,  
 65 Et reuolutus humi subito emicat, atque lacessit



torments the herd of Neptune. Would you doubt whether  
 they obey the empire of high Jupiter or the brother's sceptre?  
 Here mothers do not get angry at dogs or horses,  
 Nor does the trundling-hoop provide exercise for boys, nor the dusty  
     athletic ground, 30  
 nor running: the sea is the supreme and sole joy.  
 Each one excels others by how much more deeply they have entered the sea  
 and leave the shore and the swimmers together behind.  
 Kindled by desire for that victory, one boy, more audacious than the others,  
 dared to carry forward the point that was the final limit of the exertions 35  
 before that day, undaunted.  
 And he eagerly enters the very court of Neptune,  
 yet it is not believed that this audacity moved the bile of the king.  
 Look, from the most beloved herd, as a companion,  
 a Dolphin comes towards the boy and welcomes his approach 40  
 of its own accord: and you could see it now leading him as he followed  
 and following him as he went ahead, now drawing circles,  
 now coming under his feet and offering its back for riding,  
 now setting him down trembling at the novelty, now taking him up again  
 and carrying him onto the deep sea and again turning its path backwards, 45  
 thus finally returning him to the happy group of players.  
 Talk about this gets out, no story is better known in the entire city,  
 and the next day sees a crowded shore,  
 in order to watch, mothers come, and girls come:  
 there is one who will use the Dolphin as an excuse, about to choose, among  
     so many 50  
 excellent youths, a boyfriend of outstanding bodily shape.  
 Without delay the young people return to their familiar contests.  
 But the boy, the rider on the Dolphin, hesitates to go away from the crowd,  
 uncertain of his confidence and cautious in view of the risk,  
 and obeying his fearful mother. The fish is there on time 55  
 and marks out the boy by its course: but he,  
 with the others, revisits the shore with swift foot.  
 The Dolphin follows, but not with that rapid flight  
 applied by the mullet when pressed by Gallic nets,  
 but similar to someone inviting and calling with a nod. 60  
 It springs forth here and dives in there, and, foaming from its various  
     swimming moves,  
 it interweaves and disentangles frequent circles.  
 Just as where a puppy of the Melitaeon breed  
 plays for a tender mistress, withdraws and comes and lies down,  
 and, being rolled up on the ground, suddenly darts up and makes an attack 65

- Dentibus innocuis vestem, latratibus aures.  
 Vel qualis, iuuenes quando facilesque puellae  
 Lusibus ingenuis campo viridante calescunt,  
 Malo blanda petit iuuenem Galatea, fugitque
- 70 Illa quidem celeri pede, sed deprendier optat:  
 Itque reditque viam, ac vltro se amplexibus offert,  
 Quos vario cupit anfractu fugisse videri:  
 Talis Delphinus puerum pertentat amatum.  
 Verum hic laetitiae medius, mediusque timoris
- 75 Blanditias sentit, sed respondere veretur.  
 Viderat ille cani quondam colludere hyaenam,  
 Sed lusus inter medios in deuia raptum.  
 Omnia vincit amor; timor hic concessit amori.  
 Accedit venienti, alludit voce manumque,
- 80 Simonem appellans, & squamea tergora mulcens.  
 Adnatat, insilit in tergum, ferturque referturque,  
 Agnosci credit se, credit amari, amat ipse:  
 Insidias neuter metuit, fiducia crescit  
 Alterius tantum, quanto est mansuetior alter.
- 85 Nec non & reliqui dextra pueri atque sinistra  
 Vectorem comitantur, iter clamore frequentant:  
*Heus age dextrorsum frenis inflecte caballum,*  
*Heus nunc siste gradum, nunc nunc calcaribus vrge.*  
 Verum & Delphino suus est comes alter; it vna
- 90 Spectator ludi non pars, comitatur euntem,  
 Deducit reducem, sed nil patiturue facitue  
 Ingenium praeter piscis, moresque ferinos.  
 Alter at in litus pueris voluentibus exit,  
 Et iacet in siccis & cauda ludit arenis,
- 95 Inque suas pinna feruente reuoluitur vndas.  
 Praua superstitio, millenum caussa malorum,  
 Hos etiam ludos, grata haec spectacula turbat.  
 Hoc in pisce Deos sibi placaturus Auitus  
 Naribus affundit croceos nardique liquores.
- 100 Ilicet acris odor novitate infestat & angit  
 Delphinum: refugit trepidans, & mergitur alto,  
 Nec nisi post aliquot languens emergere soles,  
 Offenso similis diffidentique, videtur.  
 Mansisses! aevo dignum pecus, inque profundis

against her dress with innocent teeth, against her ears with barking.  
 Or just as, when young men and willing girls  
 grow hot with noble play on a verdant field,  
 charming Galatea challenges a young man with an apple and flees  
 with swift foot, but wishes to be caught: 70

and she walks and returns along the way, and she offers herself of her own  
 accord to embraces,

which she desires to be seen to be fleeing with her various turning:  
 in such a way the Dolphin tests the boy it loves.

But he, in between joy and fear,  
 senses the caressing, but he is afraid to respond. 75

He had once seen a hyena play with a dog,  
 but snatched away to remote places in the middle of the play.

Love is victorious over everything; here fear gave way to love.

He approaches it as it came, he sports with voice and hand,  
 Calling it Simo and stroking its scaly back. 80

He swims closer, jumps on the back and is carried back and forth,  
 he believes that he is understood, he believes that he is loved, he loves  
 himself:

neither fears ambush, confidence grows  
 in one of them as much as the other becomes gentler.

And, indeed, others too, on the right and the left side of the boy,  
 accompany the rider, through the route with shouts: 85

Ho, turn the horse to the right by the reins,  
 ho, now stop its step, now urge it on with spurs.

But for the Dolphin too there is another one as its comrade; it goes along  
 as a spectator, not part of the game, accompanies it as it moves, 90  
 escorts it when returning, but it does not bear or do anything  
 beyond the nature of a fish and the habits of wild animals.

But the other slips away to the shore among the boys rolling along,  
 and it lies on dry sand and plays with its tail  
 and rolls back into its home of the waves with an eagerly moving fin. 95

A perverted superstition, the reason for thousands of evils,  
 disturbs even these games, these welcome spectacles.  
 In the case of this fish, to placate the gods for himself, Avitus  
 scatters on its nostrils liquid saffron and nard-oil.

Instantly a sharp smell by its novelty annoys and chokes 100  
 the Dolphin: it withdraws trembling and dives into the deep sea,  
 and only after several days is it seen to be emerging weary,  
 similar to someone offended and diffident.

Would you had stayed! A sea animal worthy of eternity, and would you had

- 105 Narrasses, animos hominum quam stulta teneret  
 Relligio. sua sed miserum clementia perdit.  
 Nam redit ad solitum, populo plaudente, theatrum,  
 Paullatimque prior lasciuiā redditur. orbem  
 Rumores miro crebri de pisce pererrant.
- 110 Spectatum ingenti concurritur vndique turba.  
 Nunquam tot chlamydas, trabeas tot viderat Hippo,  
 Roma paludatos tot nunquam miserat illuc,  
 Multum, GRYPHE, tui absimiles, & munerum auaros.  
 Iam loca, quae tribuant ciues, iam lautia desunt.
- 115 Ira in inhumanos merito concepta Quirites  
 Expetit in miserum, nec quidquam tale merentem.  
 Ne sit, quod spectare velit damnosa Quirini  
 Gens, in Delphini coniuratur caput insons,  
 Tempore & obtruncant capto miseranda gementem.
- 120 Heu pietas! heu sancta fides! heu flebile fatum!  
 Haec erat ergo tibi pro tanto debita amore  
 Merces? sicne, viri, miseros tractatis amantes?  
 Ergo Barbariae tibi, tellus improba, nomen  
 Iure datum post haec merito, aeternumque manebit.
- 125 Te, Delphine, mori totum vetuere Camenae:  
 Tam pisces inter memorabile nomen habebis,  
 Quantum homines inter MARSCHALLI fama decusque  
 Eminent, occultoque frequens celebrabitur aeuo.

narrated in the deep what a stupid superstition held the minds of human  
 beings. 105

But its mildness destroys the poor [beast].  
 For it returns to the familiar theatre, with the people applauding,  
 and gradually its previous frolicsomeness returns. Widespread  
 rumours about the wonderful fish run through the world.  
 To watch, people come together in a huge crowd from everywhere. 110

Never had Hippo seen so many [Greek] cloaks, so many [Roman] robes,  
 never had Rome sent so many people in military garments there,  
 much different from you, GREIFF, and greedy for spectacles.  
 Already places that the citizens bestow, already provisions for guests are  
 deficient.

Anger, justly conceived against savage Quirites [i.e. Roman citizens], 115  
 falls upon the poor one, not deserving anything of this kind.  
 So that what the pernicious nation of Quirinus would like to see does not  
 occur,  
 a conspiracy is launched against the innocent head of the Dolphin,  
 and, having caught the appropriate moment, they slaughter it while it utters  
 pitiable sighs.

Alas, piety, Alas, holy trust, Alas, deplorable fate! 120

Was this then the reward owed to you in response  
 to such great love? In such a way, men, are you treating miserable lovers?  
 Thus, the name of 'Barbarian' given to you, wicked country,  
 rightly, will stay with you after this deservedly and for ever.

That you, Dolphin, should die completely the Camenae have forbidden: 125  
 among the fish you will have such a memorable name,  
 as among human beings the fame and glory of MARSCHALL  
 stands out and will be celebrated frequently over the unperceived course of  
 time.

## Commentary

**Title:** The poem's addressee is Friedrich Gotthilf von Marschall called Greiff (1675–1740), an influential civil servant and local politician, who served as first minister (1711–1715) and chancellor (1725–1728), and he supported Gesner during his time in Weimar. 'Greiff' was the original family name of this family of the German nobility; from the beginning of the sixteenth century the title of a hereditary office ('Marschall,' 'marshal') became part of the name, with the family name added as a second element.

1–128 The fact that a water feature was erected on the estate of his supporter and friend Friedrich Gotthilf von Marschall called Greiff serves as the starting point for Gesner to present him with a poem on fish as a New Year's gift. At the same time he honours Pliny as the author of the original letter. In the poem Gesner narrates the sequence of events in chronological order (vv. 19–119), as Pliny relates them in the letter: the town of Hippo enables an idyllic life by the sea coast; a boy dares to swim further out into the sea than others; between him and a dolphin a kind of friendship develops; the unusual interaction between the two turns into an sensation attracting lots of people, which destroys the idyllic way of life in the town. Eventually, the dolphin, regarded as the origin for these developments, is killed. The interlude presenting a magistrate guided by false religious beliefs has been taken over too. Gesner not only turns Pliny's narrative into a hexameter poem, but also elaborates some scenes and enriches the text with erudite information and allusions, including reminiscences of the works of a variety of prominent classical Latin authors.

The narrative of the dolphin story is framed by introductory verses directed at the addressee of the poem (vv. 1–18) and an epilogue featuring a lament at the ingratitude shown towards the dolphin and its *pietas* and *amor* towards human beings. The reference to *pietas* (v. 120) takes up a concept from the introduction, where it is said that Marschall is a man of great *pietas* (v. 18), who will be followed everywhere by the dolphin, who is equally characterized as *pious*. As a promising outlook at the end it is stated that the Muses will not let the glory of either the dolphin or Marschall disappear.

With this poem Gesner contributes to this lasting fame. In his version he makes the qualities of the dolphin more explicit and presents them in a positive light: the dolphin is presented as 'too human' (v. 21: *Humani ah! nimium . . . piscis*); its *clementia* leads to the disaster (v. 106), and it is not rewarded for its love (vv. 121–2). Here Gesner may play with the ambiguity of a potential parallelism between the dolphin treated unjustly and Marschall, equally standing out by *pietas*. Marschall is addressed directly within the

narrative (v. 113), when, in a disruption of the narrative coherence, he is set off from those who come to Hippo from Rome and expect to be entertained by the local population (vv. 111–13). In Pliny's version magistrates come and put pressure on the finances of the place; in Gesner's version, although the town also suffers from the large number of visitors, the anger of the locals against the dolphin is explained as an outlet for the anger towards 'savage Quirites [i.e. Roman citizens]' (v. 115: *inhumanos ... Quirites*) and their demands, and the killing of the innocent dolphin is presented as a kind of act of revenge against 'the pernicious nation of Quirinus' (vv. 117–118: *damnosa Quirini | Gens*).

Gesner will have expected the addressee to understand both the learned additions to Pliny's letter and the allusive comments, relating to himself, and also to enjoy the poetic description of the new water feature. Overall, when writing an occasional poem, the scholar Gesner did more than just create verses.

1–7 Marschall owned an estate in Oßmannstedt (northeast of Weimar), which was later developed into the Wielandgut, which still exists. There Marschall had apparently recently set up a water feature.

2 *Fons salientis aquae*: cf. Plin. *Ep.* 2.17.25: *haec utilitas haec amoenitas deficitur aqua salienti, sed puteus ac potius fontes habet; sunt enim in summo*; Hor. *Sat.* 2.6.2: *hortus ubi et tecto vicinus iugis aquae fons*.

4 *specularia*: literally window panes made from *lapis specularis*, a particular type of mineral that can be easily cut to size and is nearly as clear as glass. The phrasing alludes to an epigram by Martial (*Mart.* 8.14.1–4: *pallida ne Cilicum timeant pomaria brumam | mordeat et tenerum fortior aura nemus, | hibernis obiecta Notis specularia puros | admittunt soles et sine faece diem.*).

8 *alto ... pectore*: The phrasing is reminiscent of an expression in Vergil (*Verg. Aen.* 6.599–600: *sub alto | pectore*), but context and meaning are different.

9 Appropriately in line with the occasion of the new water feature and the nature of the gift, Gesner describes it as a 'fish': this 'fish' is a poem presenting another version of Pliny's story of the dolphin.

12 *Traiani decus*: Pliny the Younger (c. 61–113 CE) held several offices under emperor Trajan (r. 98–117 CE), including the role of provincial governor. While administering the province of Bithynia and Pontus, he exchanged letters with Trajan (*Plin. Epist.* 10). In 100 CE Pliny delivered a speech in the Senate including praise of Trajan, the basis for the extant *Panegyricus*.

*Comi*: Comum (modern Como), a city at the southern end of Lake Como in northern Italy and Pliny's birthplace.

17 *stabula alta ferarum*: cf. Verg. *Aen.* 6.179: *itur in antiquam silvam, stabula alta ferarum*.

19 *Diarrhytos Hippo*: Hippo Diarrhytus is the Latin name of the modern town Bizerte in Tunisia.

22 *e gurgite ponti*: cf. Lucr. 5.387: *ex alto gurgite ponti*.

23 *Euripus*: a narrow strait with strong tidal currents between the Greek island of Euboea and Boeotia in mainland Greece.

27 *Neptuni pecus*: i.e. the sea animals, referred to with a reference to the Roman sea god Neptune.

28 *Imperium ... Iouis, sceptrum ... fraterna*: alludes to the power balance between the supreme god Jupiter and his brother Neptune.

29–31 *Non ... | Non ..., non ..., | Non ...*: for such an emphatic anaphoric repetition cf. e.g. Catull. 64.63–65.

31 *sola voluptas*: cf. Verg. *Aen.* 3.660–1: *lanigerae comitantur oves; ea sola voluptas | solamenque mali*; 8.581–2: *dum te, care puer, mea sola et sera voluptas, | complexu teneo*.

51 *praestanti corpore*: a frequent Vergilian phrase, cf. Verg. *Georg.* 4.538: *quattuor eximios praestanti corpore tauros*; *Aen.* 1.71: *sunt mihi bis septem praestanti corpore nymphae*; 7.783: *ipse inter primos praestanti corpore Turnus*; 8.207: *quattuor a stabulis praestanti corpore tauros*.

59 Gesner's note on this line refers to a passage in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder, where he notes the swiftness of these fish, by which they can avoid the nets of fishermen, but may still be caught by dolphins (Plin. *HN* 9.31: *apparet acies, quae protinus disponitur in loco, ubi coniectus est pugnae. opponunt sese ab alto trepidosque in vada urgent: tum piscatores circumdant retia furcisque sublevant. mugilum nihilo minus velocitas transilit: at illos excipiunt delphini et occidisse ad praesens contenti cibos in victoriam differunt.*).

62 For the wording cf. Plin. *Ep.* 9.33.5: *delphinus exsilit, mergitur, variosque orbis implicitat expeditque*.

63–73 *Qualis ... | ... | Talis*: a series of similes illustrates the dolphin's behaviour towards the boy, indicating the love it feels, shown in play and not expressed openly, and presenting the relationship like that between a pet and a human or even two humans.



63 *Melitaea*: refers to the Dalmatian island of Melita (modern Mljet). The Elder Pliny discusses the medicinal benefits of Melitaeian puppies (Plin. *HN* 30.43).

69 *malo . . . petit . . . Galatea*: that Galatea challenges a man with an apple and runs away while wishing to be seen is a motif taken from a song of one of the shepherds in Vergil's *Eclogues* (Verg. *Ecl.* 3.64–5: *malo me Galatea petit, lasciva puella, | et fugit ad salices, et se cupit ante videri.*).

78 *Omnia vincit amor*: a quotation from Vergil's *Eclogues* (Verg. *Ecl.* 1.10.69: *omnia vincit amor: et nos cedamus amori*), highlighting the erotic dimension of the relationship.

80 *Simonem*: According to Pliny the Elder *Simo* is a typical name used for dolphins because of the snub-nosed snout (*rostrum simum*) (Plin. *HN* 9.23: *lingua est iis contra naturam aquatiliū mobilis, brevis atque lata, haut differens suillae. pro voce gemitus humano similis, dorsum repandum, rostrum simum. qua de causa nomen simonis omnes miro modo agnoscunt maluntque ita appellari.*). Gesner's annotated anthology of passages from Pliny the Elder (see Introduction) includes a comment (p. 404, n. 10) on the plausibility of the reasons for this name as reported by Pliny the Elder.

98 The proconsular legate Octavius Avitus (Plin. *Ep.* 9.33.9) is otherwise unknown. In Pliny the Elder this action is attributed to the proconsul Flavianus (Plin. *HN* 9.26).

111–12 characterizes groups of people by references to Greek (*chlamydas*) and Roman peacetime (*trabeas*) as well as Roman official military clothing (*paludatos*).

113 *Gryphe*: a Latinized version of 'Greiff' ('griffin'), an element of the addressee's name.

115 *Quirites*: the traditional formal designation of Roman citizens as civilians (taken up by *Quirini* | *Gens*). – In line with the description of the arrival of foreigners in the preceding lines (111–12), this wording suggests that the local population gets angry at the arriving Romans and aims to remove the dolphin, so that there is no longer a reason for visiting. The emphasis on 'Romans' and their characterization is added in Gesner's version.

117–18 *Quirini* | *Gens*: denotes the Romans, named after Quirinus, a name applied to the founder Romulus after his deification (for the phrasing see Sil. 16.76: *quis cedat toga et armiferi gens sacra Quirini*).

119 The anthology of poems published by Roenick (1749) has a note after this line, referring to Pliny's letter as an inspiration ('PLIN. *Ep.* I. IX. 33'). That

the note is placed at this point may indicate that the final lines commenting on the story are Gesner's addition without a direct equivalent in Pliny's version. This section emphasizes the anthropomorphic presentation of the dolphin.

119 *Tempore . . . capto*: cf. Verg. *Aen.* 11.783–4: *telum ex insidiis cum tandem tempore capto | concitat.*

120 *Heu pietas! heu sancta fides!*: cf. Verg. *Aen.* 6.878: *heu pietas, heu prisca fides.*

125 *mori totum vetuere*: cf. Hor. *Carm.* 3.30.6: *non omnis moriar; 4.8.28: dignum laude virum Musa vetat mori.*

*Camenae*: Roman goddesses, also identified with the Greek Muses since Livius Andronicus (cf. Hor. *Carm.* 2.16.37–40: *mihi parva rura et | spiritum Graiae tenuem Camenae | parca non mendax dedit et malignum | spernere volgus*).

126 *memorable nomen habebis*: cf. Ov. *Met.* 10.607–8: *seu vincar, habebis | Hippomene victo magnum et memorable nomen.*

127–8 The wording is reminiscent of Horace's *Odes* (Hor. *Carm.* 1.12.45–8: *crescit occulto velut arbor aevo | fama Marcelli; micat inter omnis | Iulium sidus, velut inter ignis | luna minores*).