ΑΥΔΗ ΤΕΧΝΗΕΣΣΑ: The Poetics of Voice in Archaic Greek Epigram

Whether explicitly or implicitly, scholars tend to read early Greek inscribed poetry as inferior and, therefore, separate from the largely orally performed poetry that comprises the canon of ancient Greek literature. In this paper, without necessarily privileging the distinction between orality and literacy, I will show how the earliest Greek poetry, whether inscribed or performed, participates in a coherent system of poetics. While work has been done on the poetics of archaic epigram, it has more often than not focused upon the influence that the early epigrams have upon the later, especially Hellenistic, tradition of literary epigram. Indeed, much ink has been spilled on the use Hellenistic poets have made of the disembodied voices of archaic epigram (e.g., Tueller). Moreover, comparisons of archaic epigram to other archaic genres typically focus upon discrete thematic and/or structural elements, rarely going beyond such concerns to consider the larger implications for our understanding of archaic poetics. In order to fill this scholarly void, I will examine the ways in which the primarily literary archaic epigram interacts with the primarily performed poetry of the period. One of the most salient differences between the performed and inscribed poetry of archaic Greece lies in the conception of the author. Central to the archaic Greek understanding of performed poetry is the conceit of the controlling voice of an individual author. However, this figure is completely effaced in archaic epigram (cf. Svenbro). I will show how the authorial voice of archaic epigram, in its very effacement, becomes an important means of accomplishing the memorializing function of the genre and, thus, is central to the poetics of the genre.

I have chosen the authorial voice as the main organizing feature of this analysis of archaic poetics because such voices are themselves the primary organizing feature of archaic poems. Archaic epigram, then, presents an interesting problem in as much as epigrams have no defined authorial voice. This problem is largely resolved when we consider individual instances of epigram as part of a larger system of poetics whose author function (in the Foucauldian sense) is assumed to be an anonymous representative of the poetic tradition (i.e., “authority” rather than “author”). It is no accident that, while we are regularly made aware of the maker or dedicator of a given inscribed artifact, we are never explicitly told who has composed the associated epigram. In this paper, I will focus on one early fifth century BCE example from Halicarnassus, *CEG* 429. This poem, which begins with an apostrophe to the cunningly wrought voice of the stone, is comprised of two elegiac couplets; the first represents the voice of the passerby and the second, that of the stone. This epigram imitates, as do many early epigrams, a dialogue between *xenos* and *sêma*, thus elaborating upon the sense of *technêessa* (l. 1) through its continuous focus on the voice *of the stone* and its proclamations (*lege*, l. 1 and *exeipen*, l. 4). The possessive genitive that specifies the owner of the artificial voice, *litho* (l. 1), must refer to the base (as the statue was bronze) and, therefore, the inscription itself. The epigram, thereby, creates its own authority by circumscribing all poetic utterance within its limits and dramatizes its efficacy as a poetic act of memorialization.

Bibliography

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