

Arrius Revisited: Conventions of Prescription in Catullus 84

In poem 84 Catullus undertakes the role of the prescriptive grammarian by offering commentary and mild invective on the affected speech of a man named Arrius, who has discovered that the Latin he learned to speak natively lacks certain features of the prestige dialect spoken at Rome by the elite, educated class. In his attempts to assimilate, Arrius has overcompensated for the deficiencies of his native dialect with hypercorrection. In even our earliest extant manuscripts (which are quite late) the poem had already lost whatever irregular spellings it originally contained, and so we owe its three wrongly aspirated words—*chommoda* for *commoda*, *hinsidias* for *insidias* and *Hionios* for *Ionios*—to the 15th c. Italian scholar Politian. His emendations have gone largely uncontested since then. While it is hardly worth debating that Catullus' aim in this poem was to draw attention to the failure of Arrius' hypercorrect pronunciations—the ways in which he frames each of the errors alongside the expected forms, as well as the reference to Arrius' upbringing and his manifest delight after enunciating one of his spurious forms, make this point unambiguous—Politian's reading and the subsequent readings that rely on his recension are not without issue. I argue that, although Politian did c. 84 a service by emphasizing its concern with phonological prescription, both his interpretation and our understanding of the poem are incomplete.

Firstly, Politian's interpretation presents an apparent imbalance to the three examples cited from Arrius' desperate idiolect. They consist in one wrongly aspirated consonant and two wrongly aspirated vowels, an unevenness that has Catullus asking his audience to laugh at the same joke twice, a joke that, as it stands, is not especially funny and only faintly hints at the poet's cultivated wit. Nevertheless, the incompleteness of Politian's interpretation is better evidenced by the attempts of subsequent scholars to explain the humor in a poem that appears to

exhibit a weak and predictable joke in place of Catullus' characteristic wit. A.J. Bell famously declared of c. 84, "What is an epigram without a point? And surely the point of an epigram should come at the end of it? So the point of this epigram must be in the word *Hionios*."¹ Both the principle that Bell cites and the inference he draws from it are sound, but the best interpretations of the epigram's point and its dependence on *Hionios* are unsatisfying. E. Harrison's argument, that *Hionios* recalls Greek χιονέους, "snowy" and that the *nuntius horribilis* of line 10 anticipates a meteorological pun²—a gale of Arrius' aspirates churned up a storm as he passed through—has proved the most enduring, but his reading is imperfect. The most significant problem is that, by blurring the line between Greek chi and Latin *h*, Catullus would undermine the fundamental premise of his poem: that an educated speaker can recognize the key phonetic differences that keep aspirated consonants, simple aspiration and unaspirated vowels distinct from one another in Classical Latin, and thus articulates accordingly. It is my contention, then, that the true nature of the pun on *Ionios*, and so Bell's "point of the epigram," has yet to be discovered.

The most complete reading of c. 84 would show the three errors working in concert, either by semantic association, which is difficult, or by some other relationship beyond the meaning of the words. The poem as a whole is patently engaged with a grammatical concern: the pronunciation of words as prescribed by the cosmopolitan Latin of Rome. With this in mind, I aim not only to reimagine the punch line contained in the final word of the poem, but also to show that there is a significant coordination between the incorrect forms, and that this coordination takes its cues from the grammatical tradition. Such a coordination makes the poem operate both as an independent piece of humorous invective (with a restored pun that is neither

¹ Bell 1915.

² Harrison 1915.

phonologically improbable nor wanting of Catullan wit) and places it squarely within the conventions that grammarians observed in discussing faults of pronunciation.

Some Bibliography

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