

Dead Poets' Society:
Persius's Choliambic Prologue and the Tradition of Hellenistic Sepulchral Epigram

Persius's collection of six satires is prefaced by a 14-line poem written in choliambic meter, which has received some scholarly attention, most recently at the hands of Reckford (2009: 52-55) and Bartsch (2015: 53-60). While scholars and commentators have noted isolated echoes in the choliambic prologue of certain sepulchral epigrams of the *Palatine Anthology* (=Greek Anthology 7), there has to date been no sustained study of how Persius makes use of these. I argue that Persius engaged with Hellenistic sepulchral epigram in a more sustained way than has been previously recognized, and that he did so for specific programmatic ends.

Persius begins by dismissing a set of traditional tropes of literary inspiration (drinking from Hippocrene, dreaming on Parnassus, the Muses of Helicon, and the spring Peirene, 1-4), declaring that he leaves all of these "to those whose representations the creeping ivy licks" (*illis remitto quorum imagines lambunt / hederæ sequaces*, 5-6). Here I see Persius engaging with epigrams by Simias (7.21, 7.22), Erycias (7.36), Antipater of Sidon (7.23, 7.30), and Dioscorides (7.708, 7.714) that memorialize Sophocles, Anacreon, and other poets of the Archaic and Classical periods. Whereas in the Greek epigrams the focus is on how the ivy, a plant with funerary associations, that covers their gravestones is an extension of the ivy-crowns they received in life as poetic victors (Plastira 2010, Montiglio 2018), Persius's image may be read as decidedly more grim: the poets' representations (*imagines*; on the marked use of this word for ancestor-masks, see Flower 1996) are first rendered invisible by the ivy that creeps over them, before ultimately being caused to crumble (the destructive power of ivy was well-known to the Romans, Pliny *NH* 16.144, 16.151-152, 16.243, 17.239). The first half of Persius's prologue concludes with a positive statement about what his poetry is (in contrast to the first six lines that

focus on what it is not): “I myself, a half-member, carry our song to the sacred places of the poet-priests” (*ipse semipaganus / ad sacra vatium carmen adfero nostrum*, 6-7). This has traditionally been read as a declaration of Persius’s status as a half-poet (in line with satire’s performative hand-wringing about whether it counts as ‘real poetry’) and as engaging with the relative merits of Latin poetry as compared to Greek—a theme that runs the length of the prologue.

Turning to the second half of the prologue, both Paratore (1964: 702-703) and Kissel (1990: 97) have noticed that the closing phrase, “to sing the nectar of Pegasus” (*cantare . . . Pegaseium nectar*, 14), has echoes of Antipater of Sidon (7.29; also 7.23, 7.27, 7.30), as well as of the neighboring sepulchral epigrams in the collection by Simonides (7.25) and Dioscorides (7.31), all of which are dedicated to Anacreon. In addition to expanding the set of references discernible in Persius’s prologue to sepulchral epigrams from the *Palatine Anthology*, I explore further the import of this remarkable engagement.

I suggest that Persius has written an epitaph of sorts for both his own genre and for Latin literature more generally, and that he chose to do so in a typically subversive manner by using the meter traditionally reserved for invective poetry. Such a reading is in line with the overall tone of Persius’s prologue, throughout which death runs as a powerful current: a series of dead poets and their out-of-date tropes (behind Hippocrene, Parnassus, Helicon, and Peirene lie Hesiod, Ennius, and Callimachus) may have their death-monuments overtaken by the creeping, consuming ivy of a graveyard. The prologue’s second half paints a depressing scene of the state of contemporary poetry: mere parroting and cawing by talentless imitators—represented by three species of bird: parrot, magpie, and crow—who need to fill their bellies (8-14). Hardly the sweet nectar of deceased Anacreon.

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