

The Ideal Symposium: Synaesthetic Description and Advice-Giving
in Xenophanes Fragment 1 West

Scholars of archaic lyric poetry have long been intrigued by the symposium described by Xenophanes in Fragment 1 West, which was first observed and thereby preserved by Athenaeus for its apparent medical relevance (Feyerabend 1987: 14). The question of the unity of the poem has stimulated examination and disagreement among scholars: how does the descriptive first half work with the advice set out in the second? Campbell (1967) and Marcovich (1978), for instance, agree that the poem is structured in two halves, but differ as to how the two halves work together. For Campbell, the “cleanliness and godliness” of the first half are “matched in beauty and order by the song and story to come” (333). Marcovich sees the first half of the poem as describing the “external, physical, preliminary conditions for an ideal symposium” while the second “sets forth ethical and religious precepts for the participants” (4). Other scholars have suggested that the poem is fragmentary and fails to achieve balance (Bowra 1938; cf. Marcovich 1978).

What has proven most difficult for readers of the poem is that whereas the theme of the decorous drinking party and sympotic ethos is depicted by other lyric poets, such as Anacreon (fr. 356a, 356b, and Eleg. 2) and Theognis (vv. 467-96, and 983-88), the advice in the second half of the poem is non-conventional. The advice proposes that the individual should be praised for his ability to promote justice and confirm virtue by his own power, rather than relying on and reciting traditional paradigms, such as stories concerning battle and strife, *πλάσματα* “fictions,” and the Epic cycle in general. Fragment 1 utilizes the symposium as a forum to reinterpret the divine based on an empirical and de-anthropomorphized approach to understanding natural phenomena, rather than as an assembly solely full of decorous charms and pleasure. In this paper

I will argue that the unification of the poem is accomplished by the synaesthetic escalation of the first half which arranges the scene and lures the audience into endorsement of the advice of the second half, and that the specific relationship between the two halves functions rhetorically in such a way that the first half induces the audience to accept the unconventional advice of the second half.

I will closely examine the convivial description in lines 1-12 of Xenophanes Fragment 1, with the intention of elucidating how these sensory descriptions develop and constitute a uniquely synaesthetic environment that sets the stage for the novel advice of “the enthusiastic reformer, who is committed to correcting the Greeks’ beliefs about divinity and nature” (Granger 2007: 1). Rather than reading Xenophanes Fragment 1 as programmatic for proper sympotic culture, I suggest reading Fragment 1 from the viewpoint of Xenophanes as an intellectual reformer of Greek religious conventions. By exploring the connections between the two halves of the poem, this paper hopes to contribute to the exploration of Xenophanes’ works within the context of sixth-century intellectual reform, as well as a philosophical tradition that perhaps employed the performative effect of elegiac couplets to evoke and suffuse sensory perception, thereby creating a more vivid and receptive environment.

Works Cited

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