

## Pleasure, Moderation, and *ῥυσμός* in Archilochus 128 W

In 133 W (West 1971), Archilochus makes two bold claims about one’s state after death: a dead man is neither revered (*αἰδοῖος*) nor of great repute (*περίφημος*), and he suffers the worst things (*κάκιστα*). Indeed, in this view, there is nothing redeeming about one’s state after death. Here, Archilochus seems to echo Achilles’ sentiment in *Odyssey* 11.489-91 (West 2017):

*βουλοίμην κ’ ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλω,  
ἀνδρὶ παρ’ ἀκλήρω, ᾧ μὴ βίητος πολὺς εἴη,  
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.*

I would rather be a serf, attached to the land, under another—a man with only a little land to his name, one who would not have a lot of goods—than rule over all the dead who have perished.

For Archilochus, as for Achilles, life is infinitely better than death, no matter what kind of life that may be, because “the worst” will come to all. Yet, for Archilochus, there is a “best” way to live life—moderately, at least in certain aspects (Will 1962; Lesky 1971; Purves 2024).

In 128 W, Archilochus gives his *θυμός* three injunctions: do not exult openly in victory or fall down in despair in defeat; do not rejoice too much in *χαρτοῖσιν* or lament too much in *κακοῖσιν*; and understand the *ῥυσμός* that governs men. Such injunctions to moderation, however, may seem counterintuitive, especially in light of Archilochus’ love of drunkenness (4 W) and his advice regarding the pursuit of pleasure (11 W):

*οὔτε τι γὰρ κλαίων ἰήσομαι, οὔτε κάκιον  
θήσω τερπωλὰς καὶ θαλίας ἐφέπων.*

Neither will I cure anything by weeping, nor will I make anything worse by attending to delights and festivities.

Indeed, the idea that the pursuit of pleasure will not make anything *κάκιον*, when read in light of Archilochus' view of one's post-mortem state, indicates a belief that pleasure is what should always be sought in life; for if one's post-mortem state entails only *κάκιστα*, then one should live life to the fullest. How, then, can Archilochus simultaneously advocate for moderation and the seemingly unbridled pursuit of pleasure?

In this paper, I will argue that the injunctions of 128 W do not contradict Archilochus' advice in 130 W when one understands the *ῥυσμός* of 128 W to refer to the alternating, up-and-down flow which the gods often bring upon those who are either battered down by evils (*ἐκ κακῶν*) or well-established (*εὖ βεβηκότας*)—a phenomenon of which Archilochus speaks in 130 W. When Archilochus' *ῥυσμός* is read in this way—and is not understood to signify the general “disposition” of men (Benveniste 1971; Claude 1993) or some cosmic law that constrains men (Felson 1981; Swift 2019)—it becomes clear that Archilochus' admonition to moderation only refers to rejoicing in or bemoaning one's *circumstances*. Rejoicing in the fact that one's circumstances are delightful is much different than seeking after things that bring delight (*τερπωλαί*), and being vexed at evil circumstances is not the same as thinking that bewailing one's circumstances can change them. I will seek to illustrate that, for Archilochus, not only is excessive rejoicing in one's circumstances useless in light of their changing nature, but also the excessive lamenting of one's circumstances is a waste of time that could be spent seeking after *τερπωλαί*.

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