

The Sound Shape of Greek Lyric: Sound and Semantics in Alcaeus fr. 129

In past studies of Alcaeus fr. 129, the sacred precinct, *temenos*, of the poem's beginning has played a programmatic role in the poem's interpretation, for example in its ritualistic and generic aspects (Nagy 1993) or its deictic creation of space (Edmunds 2012, Hutchinson 2001). Yet noteworthy phonological and semantic aspects of the poem's opening have gone unnoticed. Specifically, there is a suggestive repetition of sounds meaning 'to name,' 'flesh-eater' and later 'to swear an oath.' Roman Jakobson has identified phonology and the repetition of sound as an integral part of what he terms the “poetic function” of language (Jakobson 1979, 1981). In this paper, I follow Jakobson's suggestion and argue that Alcaeus' negative characterization of his enemy Pittacus hinges on the association of meanings produced through sound repetition in the description of the *temenos*. First, I outline the relationship of sound and meaning in the *temenos* and the invective against Pittacus made through the repetition of omega + nasal, that is |ōm| or |ōn|. I then explore how the juxtaposition of 'oaths' and 'devours' at line 23 articulates this relationship and strengthens the invective by correlating Pittacus' breaking of oaths with transgression against the sacred precinct.

Sound repetition in Alcaeus is far from uncommon, and other scholars have noted that it often carries thematic weight (fr. 130.5, Hutchinson 2001 *ad loc*; fr. 208.3-5). Fr. 129 itself demands attention to its sound with the imperative ἀκούσατ' (11) that links the opening passage concerning the *temenos* to the invective against Pittacus. In the poem's beginning, the citizens of Lesbos (1) consecrate the altars in the sacred precinct to the gods through 'naming them' (κάπωνύμασσαν 5, ὠνύμασσ[α]ν 8), a verb that is repeated twice and frames the second stanza. The description of the *temenos* also concludes with a highly alliterative sequence: first with the sound |t| in 'the third god here' (τὸν δὲ τρίτον / τόνδε 7-8) and then omega + nasal surrounding

the god Dionysus 'the flesh-eater' (ὠνόμασσ[α]ν / Ζόνυsson ὠμήσταν, 8-9). Through this repetition of sound, an association is created within the *temenos* between the dedicatory 'naming' and the epithet of Dionysus the 'flesh-eater.'

After immediately invoking the gods of the *temenos* (ἄ[γι]τ' 9) and the goddess of retribution (Ἐ[ρίνυ]s 14), this association is recalled in the phrase 'since once we swore' (ὥς ποτ' ἀπώμνυμεν 14). The verb 'we swore' repeats the omega + nasal seen in the *temenos* and links the naming activity and Dionysian epithet to the oath-taking of the speaker and others, particularly Pittacus. This nexus of meanings is then articulated later at line 23 while the speaker is lambasting the 'pot-bellied' (φύσγων 21) Pittacus: Pittacus “recklessly tramples with his feet on oaths, devouring the city” (βραϊδίως πόσιν / ἔ]μβαις ἐπ' ὀρκίοισι δάπτει / τὰν πόλιν 22-4). The juxtaposition of ὀρκίοισι and δάπτει (23), unattested elsewhere in Greek literature, reiterates the previous semantic affiliation of 'naming/oaths' and 'eating' within the *temenos*. Yet in this invective context, Pittacus abuses the affiliation and in this way transgresses against the divinities of the *temenos*; he tramples on oaths as if trampling on the altars and devours the city as if in opposition to Dionysus. Through recognizing the sonic associations at the poem's beginning, we thus gain additional insight into both the negative characterization of Pittacus in fr. 129 as well as the poetics of sound in Greek lyric.

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