

## drUNKen dICTION: The Sounds and Poetic Performance of Catullus 27

Scholarly focus on Catullus 27 has tended to target character identity and poetic precedent (Cairns, Crowther). However, discovering poetic ancestry or understanding who *magistra Postumia* was will not necessarily lead to a greater enjoyment of the poem and, in fact, may even obscure its lighter and amusing aspects. Certainly, this short poem contains many features for which Catullus is known and that never cease to delight us: ambiguity (Woytek), delicate word order, personification (Putnam, Cairns), and wit. Putnam's assessment, which has many merits, notes the structural aspects of the 7 line poem that enclose and highlight line 4 (*ebrioso acino ebriosioris*), but fails to note that that line would sound, essentially, like one long word due to the elision (*ebriosacinebriosioris*) – just the kind of slurring together of words an inebriated person would utter. Other such touches of drunken diction include the repetition of the syllable *-er* in line 1, three times in four words, all at metrically stressed points (*Minister vetuli puer Falerni*) and even its enjambed into line 2 with *inger*; this sound effectively emulates the manner in which a drunk speaker pronounces words or repeats or certain sounds. Again, this feature has been unmentioned by scholars and commentators.

Recitation of this poem offers a manner of reading and interpreting that produces new avenues of appreciation. Through recitation it is easier to notice Catullus' use of the sounds of the slurred and affected speech patterns of a drunk; furthermore, the number of syllables in this poem that emulate the sound of hiccuping become immediately evident. Whether or not the Romans considered the word *singultare* to be onomatopoeic (i.e., *sINGultare*), the fact is that the poem contains a preponderance of *-ic-*, *-inc-* and *-ing-* syllables or sounds in this poem (*-c-* and *-g-* being the same consonantal sound, unvoiced and voiced). Statistical analysis of the Catullan corpus illustrates the unusual concentration (it's pure Thyonian!) in *Carmen 27*. Of the 2292

lines in the entire corpus, the total of *-ic-*, *-inc-*, *-ing-*, and *-inq-* syllables (although the last spelling does not occur in poem 27, it represents the same sound as *-inc-*) is 538, producing an average occurrence of once every 4.2 lines. The longest poem, 64, contains a slightly higher incidence at 4.38 (probably because of *inquit*), but with 408 lines (17.8 percent of the corpus), demonstrates the general distribution. *Carmen 27* contains 6 such sounds or syllables, with a possible seventh (if *-ac-* in the elision *ebrios-acino* is considered an acceptable parallel). In any event, 6 such sounds within 7 lines presents a considerably higher concentration than average (which would be 1 or possibly 2).

Putnam, Neudling and Cairns all discuss the possible identity of the “symposiarch” *Postumia* (Putnam less specifically and more generically). Whether Cairns’ or Neudling’s suggested identity is correct we may never know for certain; however, there is an alternative suggestion which would exclude neither possibility. At least part of the fun of this little poem is its reference to *Lex Postumia* (which imposed limits on drinking in funereal and sacrificial circumstances), and although Cairns interprets the *lex* as referring to the command of the symposiarch, I think that the simple syntax is part of the joke: the listener/reader expects *Lex Postumia* and actually hears/reads *Lex Postumiae*. It is the unexpected genitive rather than the anticipated adjective that jolts, and produces one of the several jokes in the poem. It also makes the identity of *Postumia* less significant.

The final line contains the punch (so to speak). In an interesting article, Crowther provides an account of the ancient poetic “debate” between poets who drank water and wine for inspiration. Interestingly, he discusses Callimachus and Horace (among other Latin poets) but not Catullus 27. The final words *hic est merus Thyonianus* have been variously interpreted (to refer to wine (despite the gender), to the personified (or not) *Falerni(us)* of line 1, or to Catullus/

narrator). However, understanding the narrator as a poet who is, in fact, casting his vote into the supposed debate on poetic inspiration, eliminates any interpretive problem. These words indeed refer to the poet/narrator, who, in his drunken state, is proclaiming himself divinely inspired by Bacchus. With the features listed above (and others), he is parading his poetic “punniness” as evidence of that inspiration.

### Bibliography

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