

## Humoral Theory and Archilochus Fragments 230 and 234

Frag. 234 “χολήν γὰρ οὐκ ἔχεις ἐφ’ ἥπατι” (You do not have bile in your liver)

Frag.230 “κακὴν σφιν Ζεὺς ἔδωκεν αὐονήν” (Zeus sent an awful dryness to them)

Understanding how the surviving works of a fragmentary author like Archilochus fit together can be a tricky business. For instance, Archilochus fragments 230 and 234 are both brief and cryptic, but there is ample space to explore potential meanings and implications if we look for them. Both fragments display concepts that could have had significant implications to his audience that we may glean if we are willing to take a short detour into a world where medical understanding was informed by humoral theory, and then view the fragments through that medical lens.

Archilochus and his audience would have likely shared certain understandings about how fluids, organs, concepts of wet and dry, hot and cold figured into human existence. The way that extremes, and extreme dryness in particular, figure into humoral theory allow us to talk about fragments 230 and 234 in the same breath. Since the bile imbalance in 234 and the excessive dryness in 230 stem from the same view of the body, reading them together can give us a better understanding of the nature of the negative statements made in the fragments.

The humoral view has a preoccupation with achieving the correct balance (including circulation and creation) of fluids throughout the body (King, 2003). In Archilochus fragments 230 and 234 we can see words and concepts that in one case are likely manifestations of this worldview and understanding of health, the physical body, and its interactions with its environment that would have had multilayered implications for Archilochus’ audience. Both deal with excessive dryness, explicitly so in 230, and by implication – but with terms far more explicitly connected to the humoral medical understanding - in 234.

Iambic authors can be thought of as ‘purging’ their excessive bile through their words – purging being one process by which balance could be achieved in humoral medicine (Nutton, 2013; Porter, 2006). Indeed, it is entirely plausible that the statement in 234 about an utter lack of bile may be about the inability to write virulent poems. Viewed through the lens of humoral theory, however, Archilochus’ statement is much starker than if he had only said that his addressee did not have sufficient bile to create the invective verse that made Archilochus famous. The liver, as the seat of bile in the body, is the one place that should always have some of this fluid and it should never be dry. Just as something is wrong in a humoral body when humors are overproduced, an utter lack of one of the humors is a serious sign that all is not well. The rest of the narrative may very well be about the inability to harness bile for poetry, but within the single line that we have to work with, we can say with some certainty that Archilochus is telling us that something is very wrong with his addressee.

If we look at the conditions laid out in 230 through the terminology used to discuss health in humoral theory, such as wet and dry, hot and cold, and the quest for a proper balance and flow between the different fluids in the body, we see a clear appearance of a suggestive and loaded concept – an extreme. Extreme dryness in a framework that seeks balance and fears excess is a negative and undesirable quality that was understood to lead to poor health, both on a personal level and on a macro, community scale. Hawkins suggests that it is possible to read this line as part of a narrative about a social crisis stemming from an “ecological collapse” and argues that we can push the “awful dryness” in the fragment to beyond a drought the appearance of the heat and disease bringing Dog Star (Hawkins, 2009).

Both of these fragments contain a quality (extreme dryness) that had widely accepted meanings in the prevalent medical views of the time. A clear and deep understanding of this

worldview therefore is important in any discussion of potential meanings or contexts for both of these fragments – and examining Archilochus through this medical lens grants us one more avenue of attack on understanding the context that fragments might have had.

#### Bibliography

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