

## The Agency of Things in the Poetry of Hipponax

One of the salient elements in the poetry of Hipponax is its unprecedented attentiveness to inanimate objects, often depicted as having an agency of their own that alters or supersedes human intentions. In fr. 28 W, for instance, a snake, painted awkwardly on the side of a ship, while intended to be an apotropaic sign, functions ironically as a bad omen and a real danger to the captain. Elsewhere inadequate cloaks, dirty dwellings, dilapidated domestic items, and even wished-for absent objects determine to a considerable extent the characters' actions. In fr. 32 W, the various expensive pieces of clothing and the "sixty staters of gold" located apparently in the interior of an affluent house exert sufficient attraction to tempt the speaker to try to steal them. In Hipponax's world, even the particular members of the human body are objectified, operating independently from the will of their possessor. Nature and environment seem to have the upper hand at the expense of human volition. By limiting his characters' functions to fulfilling basic biological necessities (satisfying hunger, staying warm, copulating), Hipponax aligns human life with that of the animal world, while also integrating it into its inanimate surroundings with the objectivity of a detached observer. In fr. 92 W, for instance, the focus is equally divided among the sexual partners, dung beetles, and the filthy room. This tendency to incorporate the human presence into its larger environment and to emphasize forces such as poverty and violence brings the poet surprisingly close to 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary Naturalism. Hipponax of course is not a proto-Naturalist, at least consciously. He is an aristocratic poet who has chosen to adopt a persona ("Hipponax") and place it at the lowest levels of an urban underclass. His interest in the power of material objects to affect the behavior of his characters may suggest his willingness to assume a diversity of influences behind human action in general. But his depiction of life at the lowest substrata as being both ludicrous and barely distinct from animal existence reveals clearly an

elitist point of view, in this case modified by the conventions of the iambic genre. Hipponax is the only archaic poet who, through the assumption of a plebeian persona, immerses himself into a demimonde in which survival is tested by both social forces that lie beyond the characters' control and by their own moral weakness that makes them more susceptible to the temptations of the things that surround them.

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