

Talking Dead: The Deceased as Speaker in Hellenistic Funerary Epigrams

The last few decades have seen a blooming of scholarship on Greek epigrams of the Hellenistic period. In the sub-genre of funerary epigrams, much has been discussed about the “voice” of the epigram (Tueller 2008), characterization (Zanker 2007), and the vivid interaction between the text, the monument and the passer-by, by means of which the reader is engaged in the text (Meyer 2007). However, few scholars have focused on the characterization of the deceased through their “voice”.

In my paper, I attempt to fill this gap by examining a selection of Hellenistic epigrams from Book VII of the Greek Anthology (*AP* 7) that feature the deceased as a first-person speaker. By means of literary and narratological analyses, I highlight the vividness of the portrayal of the deceased and discuss the manifold role of their “voice” in conveying and problematizing this vividness.

The first section of the paper examines epigrams in which the deceased recreates immersive narratives about the event of their death. Following recent applications of cognitive narratology to classical texts (Allan 2018), I will argue that these narratives facilitate the reader’s immersion, namely “the feeling of being transported to a virtual world to the extent that one experiences it—up to a point—as if it were the actual world” (Allan 2018, 132). A case in point is *AP* 7.172, where the deceased, after having laid out the work he carries out, zooms in on the moment immediately preceding death with the internally focalizing imperfect εἶργον. In this heightened moment, the deceased introduces the cause of death (ἔχιδνα... ἐνεῖσα χόλον) and punctuates his demise with a definitive aorist (ἠελίου χήρωσεν). Following Allan’s categories, the first-person narrative, chronological sequence of events, use of bodily movements and

frequent directional words allow the readers to be transported to the scene, and the ἴδ' ὡς of the closing line explicitly encourages them to see the event as if they were physically present. An analogous analysis can be offered of *AP* 7.506 which inserts a similarly immersive account of the speaker's accidental death at sea.

The second section of the paper turns its focus to epigrams which “reanimate” the dead by having them speak about current sensorial and perceptual experiences. The shipwrecked sailor of *AP* 7.267 bemoans his location to his buriers, voicing his opinion that he ought to have been interred far away from the cause of his demise. The deceased professes to “shudder” (φρίσσω) at the sound of the waves, an act that also points to his faculty of hearing, but then assures passersby that despite his afflictions, he still wishes them well. In his speech, the deceased not only explicitly refers to current physical and aural experiences, but also implicitly shows his wandering thought process and emotional shift from internal agony to peaceful goodwill. Comparable post-death “living” experiences are identified in the discerning dead of *AP* 7.658 and the playful Philaenis of *AP* 7.345. No longer confined to their pre-death experiences, the talking dead seem to assume another “life” after their demise.

In the final section, I will focus on the epigrams giving voice to Timon the misanthrope (Gutzwiller 1998), to illustrate how the deceased often includes a complex meta-literary agenda in his first-person speeches. After death Timon retains his notorious unpleasant nature, as shown in the numerous negative commands that saturate his speech (*AP* 7.316), and once even asserts his “aliveness” (οὐδ' ... γνήσιός εἰμι νέκυς, *AP* 7.315). At the same time, Timon's speeches subvert all the conventions of funerary epigrams by demanding the passersby to avoid interacting with his tombstone. Timon goes as so far as to withhold the name of the deceased (*AP* 7.314, 318) and thus strips the funerary epigram of its most crucial identifying function. Overall,

Timon's voice not only offers the readers a vivid portrait of himself, but also highlights a subtle paradox, namely that here vividness is achieved through an apparent denial of the traditional way in which the epigram engages its audience (via identification with the passerby).

In conclusion, the deceased as a first-person speaker requires more attention within the study of Hellenistic funerary epigrams, as their "voice" effectively invites the readers to immerse into diverse epigrammatic scenarios and simultaneously forces them to reflect upon the conventions and subversions of this sub-genre.

Bibliography

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