CHAPTER 8

Narratorial Authority and Its Subversion in Archilochus

Laura Swift

From the earliest examples of Greek poetry, we find poets developing strategies to bolster their authority and present their narrative as superior to that of their rivals. Thus, for example, poets include appeals to the Muses or stories of divine inspiration in order to provide external authority for the events they describe. Conversely, they use traditional moralizing to derive their own authority from the received wisdom of the community, or rhetorical techniques to make their words seem persuasive. This chapter will explore how such techniques are manipulated or parodied in the poetry of Archilochus, and I will argue that the self-conscious distortion of these traditional strategies is a characteristic feature of Archilochus' style. Archilochus' poetry is frequently humorous and acerbic, and it is therefore not surprising to find that the poet distorts the strategies used in “higher” poetic forms to draw attention to the vulgarity of his own narrative. The first part of the chapter will discuss two poems in which authoritative strategies are debunked for comic effect: frs. 25 and 122 W. Yet poems which are serious in tone may also manipulate such conventional strategies to confound audience expectations, and the second part of this chapter will show how this is achieved in the recently discovered “Telephus poem” (P. Oxy. LXIX 4708).¹ The chapter will focus in particular on the use of gnōmai, exempla, priamels, and mythological paradigms. As we shall see, the poet not only demonstrates his familiarity with these as authoritative devices but engages in detail with how they are conventionally deployed in poetry. By altering or subverting these expectations, Archilochus draws his audience's attention to his status as narrator and encourages them to reflect upon the poet's authority and question the validity of the statements they hear.

¹ The text given for frs. 25 and 122 W is that printed in West's IEG²; the text of P. Oxy. LXIX 4708 given is that of Obbink (2006), which supersedes his original publication of the fragment in Obbink (2005). Translations are my own.
A common way to gain authority for a narrative is by making a gnomic statement that the audience will recognize from their cultural experience and agree to be true. When a poet offers a *gnōmē* directly to his audience, he presents himself as speaking not merely from subjective experience, but as the guardian of values passed down over generations. Using a *gnōmē* is a way of enhancing one’s own authority by appealing to a higher source of wisdom and insinuating that one has the right to disseminate these views on behalf of a wider community. In fr. 25 we see Archilochus alluding to the cultural authority conferred by *gnōmai* in a narrative whose moral is far from serious:

... human nature, but different people's hearts are gladdened by different things ... for Melesandros cock ... (cunt?) for the cowherd Phalan(gios). (It was no other) prophet but I who proclaimed this to you. For to me Zeus, the father of the Olympians made ... and good among men, and not even Eurymas would find fault.

What survives appears to be a proem that prepares the ground for a longer narrative illustrating the variability of human life, presumably to humorous effect. The *gnōmē* with which the poem begins—humans are different—would have

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2 For discussion of use of *gnōmai* within literary texts and how these affect the relationship between poet and audience, see Abrahams and Babcock (1977).

3 *Gnōmai* can be offered more or less directly; simply offering a *gnōmē* which applies directly to the addressee acts as marker of social authority; less confident speakers are more likely to present a *gnōmē* indirectly. For detailed discussion, see Lardinois (1997) 221–233 and Lardinois (2000).

4 For the original publication of this papyrus see Lobel (1954a), and for textual and papyrological discussion see Peek (1955); Latte (1955); Lasserre (1956); Mette (1960); Steffen (1961); Gallavotti (1975).