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Author(s): Elizabeth Vandiver

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SOUND PATTERNS IN CATULLUS 84*

Chommoda dicebat, si quando commoda uellet
 dicere, et insidias Arrius hinsidias,
 et tum mirifice sperabat se esse locutum,
 cum quantum poterat dixerat hinsidias. 5
 credo, sic mater, sic liber auunculus eius,
 sic maternus auus dixerat atque auia.
 hoc misso in Syriam requierant omnibus aures:
 audibant eadem haec leniter et leuiter,
 nec sibi postilla metuebant talia uerba,
 cum subito affertur nuntius horribilis: 10
 Ionios fluctus, postquam illuc Arrius isset,
 iam non Ionios esse sed Hionios.¹

Catullus 84 has generated its share of critical commentary, but scholars' discussions of the poem have concentrated on Arrius' identity and the usual Roman pronunciation of the aspirate rather than on analysis of the poetic techniques used in the piece.² This paper will argue that Arrius and his mispronunciations not only provide the poem's subject, but also serve as a pretext for a sophisticated structure of carefully arranged sounds. This structure deserves more attention than it has heretofore received.

Poem 84 is a complex web of sound in which Catullus intertwines letters, words, and meter to underscore his caricature of Arrius' mispronunciations. The sounds and the meanings of the words are intricately interwoven to reinforce and support one another subtly throughout the poem. Catullus carefully manipulates the letter *h* (used both correctly and incorrectly), the letter *s*, the metrical positions of certain aspirated words, and elision to enhance his points about pronunciation and mispronunciation. Of course, a discussion of Catullus' use of aspirations, the letter *s*, and elision inevitably depends on the assumption that it is possible for us to know both how the Romans pronounced these sounds and how they themselves perceived their pronunciation. It is naturally impossible to be completely sure about such matters, but fortunately there is enough ancient testimony about Roman pronunciation to make possible a fair degree of certainty.³

Cicero discusses aspiration as a possible pitfall for the unwary speaker in *Orator* 48.160. After saying that consonants were never aspirated in archaic Latin and deploring the changes in pronunciation that had occurred during his

¹The text cited is Kenneth Quinn, *Catullus: The Poems* (New York 1970) 77.

²See, for example, Robinson Ellis, *A Commentary on Catullus* (Oxford 1889) 458–59; C. J. Fordyce, *Catullus: A Commentary* (Oxford 1961) 373–77; Quinn 418–19; E. S. Ramage, "Note on Catullus' Arrius," *CP* 54 (1959) 44–45.

³For full discussions of Roman pronunciation of *s*, *h*, and elided *m*, see Edgar H. Sturtevant, *The Pronunciation of Greek and Latin* (Philadelphia 1940²), and W. Sidney Allen, *Vox Latina: A Guide to the Pronunciation of Classical Latin* (Cambridge 1965).

lifetime, Cicero admits that he has succumbed to popular usage in his pronunciation of certain words: "usum loquendi populo concessi, scientiam mihi reservavi." Quintilian refers specifically to poem 84 in his discussion of aspiration. Describing the letter *h*, he says that its "ratio mutata cum temporibus est saepius. Parcissime ea veteres usi etiam in vocalibus . . . diu deinde servatum ne consonantibus aspirarent . . . erupit brevi tempore nimius usus . . . qua de re Catulli nobile epigramma est" (1.5.20). Even two centuries later, Marius Plotius Sacerdos called incorrect aspiration a type of *barbarismus*, and identified two sorts of mistaken aspiration: "per aspirationem, ac si dicas hora vultus, cum ora debeant dici; per lenitatem, ac si dicas oram tempus diei, cum horam debeas dicere."⁴ And Martianus Capella describes the actual process of aspiration by saying that in the utterance of *h* "contractis paululum faucibus uentus exhalat."⁵

Catullus tells us that Arrius not only misaspirated but did so with great gusto, "quantum poterat," and Einarson suggests that we should "suppose that the hiss with which Arrius pronounced *hinsidias* and *Hionios* could be heard or interpreted as a Greek *chi*."⁶ Therefore, since Arrius' difficulty in pronunciation lay in his tendency to release too much air, that is to hiss, it is noteworthy that the letter *s* occurs more frequently in poem 84 than does any other consonant. In the twelve lines of the poem, *s* occurs 40 times, and there are two occurrences of *x*, which is of course closely related to *s* in its pronunciation.⁷ It seems likely that the frequency in poem 84 of the hissing sound of the letter *s* reinforced Catullus' portrayal of Arrius' "blast of aspirates."⁸ An examination of the ancient grammarians' discussions of the letter *s* supports this idea, since the grammarians describe *s* simply as a hiss. Cleonius says that *s* "sibilus magis est quam consonans,"⁹ and Martianus Capella says that *s* "sibilum facit dentibus uerberatis."¹⁰ Terentianus, discussing *s* and *x* together, says that these letters

vicina quidem sibila dentibus repressis
miscere videntur; tamen ictus ut priori
et promptus in ore est agiturque pone dentes
sic levis et unum ciet auribus susurrum.¹¹

Certain positions in which Catullus places *s* are even more striking and more important than the frequency of the letter. Six of the poem's twelve lines end in *s*: the first two pentameters, the middle two hexameters, and the final two pentameters. In the four pentameters which end in *s*, the final word begins in *h*

⁴Marius Plotius Sacerdos, *Artium Grammaticarum*, in Heinrich Keil, ed., *Grammatici Latini*, VI (Leipzig 1868) 451.

⁵Martianus Capella, *Opera*, ed. Adolf Dick (Stuttgart 1969) 261.

⁶B. Einarson, "On Catullus 84," *CP* 61 (1966) 188. Fordyce (p. 377) thinks this interpretation of *chi* is unlikely.

⁷*T* is the second most frequent consonant in the poem, with 29 occurrences, followed by *r* with 25.

⁸Quinn 421. Quinn and Einarson both support E. Harrison's suggestion that *Hionios* is a pun on the Greek *chioneous* (*CR* 29 [1915] 198).

⁹Cleonius, *Ars*, in Keil, V, 28.

¹⁰Martianus Capella, ed. Dick, 261.

¹¹Terentianus Maurus, *De Litteris*, in Keil, VI, 332.

and is four syllables long (*hinsidias*, 2: *hinsidias*, 4; *horribilis*, 10; and *Hionios*, 12.)

Of these four words that begin with *h*, end with *s*, are four syllables long, and stand last in a pentameter, three are obviously aspirated incorrectly. (The fourth, *horribilis*, will be discussed below.) It seems likely that the final *s*, and in *hinsidias* the internal *s* as well, worked with the incorrect initial *h* of these words to produce an especially "overaspirated" sound.¹² The repetition of *s* throughout the poem contributes to this same effect, which is particularly noticeable in the final couplet, "Ionios fluctus postquam illuc Arrius isset/ iam non Ionios esse sed Hionios." Indeed, in the words "Ionios esse sed" *s* occurs four times in as many syllables. And it is important to notice the double *s* in both *isset* and *esse*. As Allen comments, these double consonants are not mere spelling conventions; "the *ss* of classical Latin is of course also to be pronounced voiceless, and double."¹³

The reiterated hissing of *s* throughout poem 84 is noticeable in its absence in one line, and one line only, that contains not a single *s*. This is line 8, "audibant eadem haec leniter et leuiter." This line describes the relief occasioned to Roman ears by Arrius' absence; thus the line's sound, in which the repeated hissing of *s* ceases for the only time in the poem, supports the meaning conveyed by the line's content.

In addition to the absence of the letter *s*, line 8 includes other noteworthy points. Its final word, *leuiter*, is almost certainly a pun concerning the correct, unaspirated pronunciation heard during Arrius' absence. The Greek symbol for a smooth breathing was called "spiritus leuis" by the Romans, so to pronounce unaspirated words correctly would mean to pronounce them *leuiter* in two senses of that word.¹⁴

More significant than the pun on *leuiter* is the fact that there is one aspirated word, *haec*, in line 8. This correctly aspirated word refers to the very words mispronounced by Arrius, and occupies the prominent metrical position ending the first half of the pentameter and standing just before the caesura. So this word *haec* conveys the central point of the line, that the words Arrius mangled are now being pronounced correctly, and is the metrical center of the line as well.

It is also important to notice in line 8 that the word *eadem*, which precedes *haec*, elides with that word. Unfortunately, the sound of a final *m*, especially in elision, is one of the most difficult points of Roman pronunciation for modern scholars to determine precisely. Allen says that "in general it seems to have been reduced . . . to a mere nasalization of the preceding vowel."¹⁵ When a syllable ending in *m* is elided, Allen and Raven agree that in all probability the elision consisted of completely suppressing the final syllable of the first word.¹⁶ So the words *eadem haec*, the very words that refer to Arrius'

¹²It is interesting to note in this connection that the Latin letter *s* is equivalent to the Greek rough breathing in certain words (e.g., Lat. *sex*/Gk. *hex*; Lat. *sequor*/Gk. *hepomai*). See C. D. Buck, *Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin* (Chicago 1933) sec. 161, p. 132. I wish to thank one of the anonymous referees and the editor of *CJ* for calling this point to my attention.

¹³Allen 36; italics his.

¹⁴Quinn 420.

¹⁵Allen 30–31.

¹⁶*Ibid.* 30–31 and 78; D. S. Raven, *Latin Metre, An Introduction* (London 1965) 27.

mispronunciation of both initial and consonantal aspirates, would be sounded *eadhaec*; in these two words Catullus includes both kinds of aspiration over which Arrius came to grief. *Haec* is actually an initially aspirated word, but in this combination it sounds as if the *d* of *eadem* were an aspirated consonant. Catullus demonstrates here his own virtuosity in the correct placement of aspirates; and to make his meaning even more pointed, he does so in words that refer to Arrius' mispronunciations.

Haec is one of only three words in the entire poem in which the aspirate appears correctly. The other two are *hoc*, 7, and *horribilis*, 10. All three words occupy conspicuous metrical positions. *Hoc* begins its line; *haec* is in the metrical center of its pentameter; and *horribilis* ends line 10. The meanings of these words are no less noteworthy than their metrical positions, as *hoc* refers to Arrius himself and *haec* to the words he mispronounced. *Horribilis*, as noted above, is one of four words that begin with the aspirate, end in *s*, are four syllables long, and end a pentameter. But *horribilis* is the only one of these four words that is correctly aspirated. And this word itself describes the *effect* which the other three four-syllable words, in lines 2, 4, and 12, have on Arrius' unfortunate auditors. This word, *horribilis*, is correct in form and is "*horribilis*" only in meaning; its sense is the result produced on the listeners by the sounds of the other three words. So we see that the only correctly aspirated words in the poem, *hoc*, *haec*, and *horribilis*, appear in the three most conspicuous metrical positions (beginning, middle, and end of the line) and refer to in turn to Arrius himself, his mispronunciations, and the effect of those mispronunciations on his audience.

Throughout poem 84, Catullus adds depth and dimension to the immediately observable content by his interweaving of sound and sense. This intricate interplay of method and meaning should come as no surprise in a Catullan poem that is, after all, *about* sounds and words. The interrelations, placements, and sounds of the words work together with their meanings to recreate, in the poem itself, the impression that Arrius' speech made on the listener.

ELIZABETH VANDIVER

University of Georgia

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