SOME FUNCTIONS OF THE ENCLOSED INVECTIVE IN ARCHILOCUS’ EROTIC FRAGMENT

τὸ δὴ νῦν γυνῳθι. Νεοβούλη[ν δὲ τις] [ἀ]λλὸς ἀνὴρ ἐχέτω: αἰαὶ πέπειρα δὴ[έστι ,] [ἀν]θος δ᾿ ἀπερρύνηκε παρθενίον
[k]αὶ χάρις η ἐπὶ πρῖν ἐπὶν· κόρον γὰρ οὐ κατέσχε πω,]
[ἡβ]ῆς δὲ μέτρ’ ἐφηνε μανιўλίς γυνῆ.
[ἐ]ς κόρακας ἀπέχε: μη τὸ τοῦτο έφοιτ’ ἀν[αξ θεών]
[ὁπως ἐγὼ γυναίκα τα[οι]αύτην ἔχων
[γει]γος χάριμ᾽ ἐσομαι· πολλὸν σε βουλο[μαι πάρος· ]
[οῦ] μὲν γὰρ οὖν ἀπιστος οὔτε διπλό,”
[ἡ δὲ] μᾶλ’ ἀθυτήρει· πολλοὺς δὲ ποιεῖαι[μ φίλους·]
[δέ]δοιχ’ ὅπως μη τυφλὰ καλιτήμερα
[στὶ]οῦνθι ἐπειγόμενος τῶς ὀσπερ ἧ κ[ῶν τέκω.”]"

"Count on this now! Let some other man possess Neobule! My god, she is overripe, her girlhood bloom has withered and dropped off, also the grace of before: she’s never yet kept down her lust—a frenzied slut that’s shown her woman’s prime.

Out to the crows! Keep her off! May never he who rules the gods decree that I—possessed of such a wife—stand as a neighborhood butt. Instead, I much prefer you, for you are neither faithless nor two-faced: but she is very piercing, makes many men her ‘very own’; I fear lest, by acting in a rush I (just like the bitch) may beget blind and untimely things.”

(following Van Sickle’s translation1 with minor modifications)

In this study I argue that the embedded invective against Neobule in Archilochus’ erotic fragment (P. Colon. inv. 7511)2 allows for a development in


I would like to thank John Van Sickle and Mary R. Lefkowitz for helpful critiques on an earlier version of this paper.

2For a review of the pertinent literature see John Van Sickle [a], 1-15 (note 1 above); [b] “The New Erotic Fragment of Archilochus,” QUCC 20 (1975) 123-156 and references cited there; and
the male narrator from potentially unrestrained to restrained by (1) providing a 
legitimate, almost cathartic, outlet for his emotional excess and by (2) allowing 
him to objectify and disown certain character traits ascribed to Neobule. 
Without doubt the invective is integral to the poem; Nagy even suggests that 
this enclosure may itself have determined the narrative, that the verbal ex-
change and interaction between the narrator and the daughter of Amphimedó 
frame and thus perhaps highlight the abusive rejection of Neobule.3 But surely 
the function of the poem is not invective. Language and topoi place it in the 
genre of love poetry.4 Perhaps in the seventh century B.C., as later in the Latin 
elegiac, abuse of a former beloved suited the genre of erotic poetry; perhaps too 
the negative romance was sometimes the controlling one. Yet, in Archilochus’ 
poem, the focus is clearly on the more recent and positive “event”.5 What then 
is the impact of the Neobule passage on the structure and meaning of the poem?

Some have shown how Neobule functions on the rhetorical plane as poetic 
foil, providing an antithesis and an appropriate contrast to the maiden presently 
desired; this view is argued, for example, by Van Sickle, who finds however 
that the maiden, by the end of the poem, betrays the “aristocratic ideal of 
restraint which she appears to enunciate” earlier in the encounter.6 Henderson 
too believes that “for the reflective reader the poet allows a glimpse of the 
beginning of that progress into womanhood which Neobule has already ta-
ten.”7 This suggestion that the maiden indeed compromises herself and hence 
risks becoming an overripe Neobule possibly explains the inclusion of the 
Neobule passage. That would imply that the poet includes the enclosure either 
as a warning to the maiden (a negative exemplum) or simply as an interesting 
description of two maidens in parallel situations; the parallel need not entail or 
emphasize value judgement.

An explanation quite different from the above merits consideration. It 
emerges from the application of narrative or plot structure analysis8 to the 
narrator’s “interactions” with the maiden and with Neobule. This approach to 
the two narrative interactions as narrative syntags or chains circumvents the

bibliography). The Fall 1976 issue of Arethusa is a thematic issue on the fragment; see also 
the important presentation of the text and discussion by H. Flashar, Th. Gelzer, L. Koenen, K. Maurer, 
468-512. No literature after Dec., 1976, has been consulted.


4For discussions of erotic diction and topoi see Jeffrey Henderson, “The Cologne Epode and the 
Conventions of Early Greek Erotic Poetry,” Arethusa 9 (1976) 159-180 and Francois Lasserre, 
“Ornements Érotiques dans La Poesie Lyrique Archaique” in Serta Turyniana. Studies in 
Greek Literature and Palaeography in honor of Alexander Turyn, ed. by John L. Heller (Urbana 
1974) 5-33.

5This is clear, for example, from the number of lines devoted to each interaction, from the 
presence of the one maiden as opposed to the absence of the other, and from the immediacy and 
vividness of the narrator’s account of the action that culminated his dialogue with Amphimedó’s 
daughter.

6Van Sickle (note 1 above [a]) 11.

7Henderson (note 4 above) 174.

8For a thorough bibliography on plot structure studies, see Umberto Eco’s concise list (A Theory 
of Semiotics [Bloomington, London 1976]) 12. I have used a very simple model adapted from C. 
Bremond, Le Logique du recit (Paris 1973). The narrative syntagm begins with the possibility of an
controversial issue of biography vs. fiction, and highlights a new dimension in our understanding of the function of the embedded invective. The narrator/maiden relationship is counterpoised against that of the narrator and Neobule. The latter is a negative relationship. The invective through which it is made accessible to us captures only a moment in what appears to be (or to have been) an ongoing interaction. Any past incidents in this interaction must be reconstructed and must remain hypothetical.

The two narrative syntagms are as follows. For the narrator with the present maiden desire leads to request and action which leads either to complete fulfillment if his desire is viewed as limited or moderate, or to partial fulfillment if his desire is for full intercourse. In the case of the narrator with Neobule, his mention of an earlier charis (22: charis hè prin epén) implies that at one time she was desirable; the maiden’s offer of the girl within the house raises the possibility of a present relationship with her. This other girl, who must be Neobule, is purported to desire him now (3: hè nún meg himeirei). The narrator rejects this possibility through a vehement and abusive attack on Neobule’s character.

Thus the possibility of a relationship in one case is fulfilled (either partially or completely), while in the other it is completely rejected (though it might once have been desirable); but in each case there is a definite linear or narratival chain moving from a possibility to some end-point. The narrator engages in two different types of relationship. Perhaps he can be viewed as participating or having participated in a whole spectrum of relationships. He may have been excessive at times, either with Neobule in the past, or, as Van Sickle speculates, with the maiden herself in the lost opening of the epode. In any case, one senses that his excessive verbal abuse of Neobule may correlate with a

achievement and ends with fulfillment or non-fulfillment or partial fulfillment of that possibility. Complex or convoluted syntagms can, of course, exist, and the Initial, Procedural, and Terminal Events may be symbolized (e.g., by a, b, and c). However, in the Archilochus fragment the action proceeds along rather straightforward pathways. Hence it was not necessary to convert the syntagms to symbolic language.

9See M.L. West in “Ein wiedergefundenes Archilochus-Gedicht?” (note 2 above) 481-5. Cf. Mary R. Lefkowitz, “Fictions in Literary Biography: The New Poem and the Archilochus Legend,” Arcthusa 9 (1976) 181-190. In a strong attack on the biographical approach to literary criticism she concedes that: “Nonetheless, the fictional biographies deserve our attention because they derive primarily from the author’s work and thus preserve at least the names and narrative patterns of poetry now lost to us.” (182). It may well be, as K.J. Dover implies by his agnosticism in “The Poetry of Archilochus,” Entretiens sur L’Antiquite Classique 10: Archilochus (Fondation Hardt, Geneva 1964) 197-206, that our material is too scanty for a narrative reconstruction to be possible.

10This implication is supported by the narrator’s use of apistos and diploë with a form of double negation to describe “bad qualities which the girl does not have.” Presumably, by contrast (see Van Sickle [a] 8), Neobule is “faithless” and “two-faced”. Imputation of such negative qualities to Neobule would imply a more than passing knowledge of her, and thus support the hypothesis of a prior relationship between her and the narrator.

11See the conjectured reconstruction of Van Sickle ([b] espec. 130ff.), which entails a statement by the narrator to the effect that “I desire you and the sweet longing grips me to share with you the delights of Aphrodite here and now”. This statement would occur in the lost beginning of the epode, its reconstruction based on topoi comparisons especially with passages from the apatê of Zeus. (esp. Ξ. 329ff).
former excessive passion, whether fictive or historical. In contrast, he is cautious and somewhat restrained toward the maiden, at least in the extant lines of the text.

The contrast between this restraint and his excesses elsewhere (either in abusiveness or ardor) becomes especially clear through an examination of the language of the fragment. For example, his verbal relation with the absent Neobule utterly lacks restraint. Against her he releases violent abuse: he does not "hold himself back." The very intensity of his present abuse would suggest earlier excess of emotional fervor, such a vehement response does she stir in him now. Moreover, the theme of control vs. release is not alien to the poetry of Archilochus: elsewhere too he argues for moderation, most notably in addressing a bereaved companion (Diehl 7) and his own troubled thumos (Diehl 67a).12

In vv. 26-27 of the fragment the narrator expresses fear of his own impetuosity: "I fear lest, by acting in a rush, I (like the bitch) may beget blind and untimely things." Clearly he fears not the birth of bastard children, but the products of untimeliness and haste, namely, another relationship like the one with Neobule or a renewed relationship with Neobule. Moreover, total loss of control, total abandonment to passion, would equate him with "Neobule now", which he, the narrator, has set up as the most negative of extremes. Neobule is, he claims, mal' oxuterê, "extremely piercing".13 She is mainolis and does not hold back insolence (koros). Thus on the spectrum from control to release Neobule occupies the one extreme. The daughter of Amphimedon, in contrast, starts near the other,14 but moves toward a compromising center. The narrator himself, unrestrained with regard to Neobule (perhaps once in action, now in words), will fit (by both action and words) somewhere in the middle of the continuum with regard to the maiden. This is brought out by parex (10), kêpous (16), epipsauôn (35), and also, to be shown below, by epéusin (33). Unmistakably the pursuer, he is not unrestrainedly aggressive—he does not force full intercourse on the maiden; moreover, he completes his part of the dialogue with an expression of anxiety lest he be guilty of the same excesses for which he has just reviled Neobule.

So far, then, two functions served by the invective have emerged. First, it enables the narrator to contrast a past or possible relationship with Neobule to

12 For a discussion of this theme in Archilochus' poetry see Helen North, Sophrosyne. Self-Knowledge and Self-Restraint in Greek Literature (Ithaca 1966) 22 and Rudolph Pfeiffer, "Gottheit und Individuum in der frühgriechischen Lyrik," Philologus 84 (1928) 137-152. Van Sickle ([a] 11) calls "control" (or total restraint) an aristocratic ethos and "release" (or loss of control) a deviation from that ethos.

13 Oxuterê is an odd and therefore striking adjective to apply to a woman. Associated by Pindar with frenzies for unattainable desires (Nem. XI.47-8: kerdeon de chrê metron thêreumen aprosiskôn d' erôdon oxuterai maniai), it seems elsewhere to describe anything that moves across or through a boundary: a weapon, the rays of the sun, mental perception. On a connotative level, it epitomizes the inappropriately aggressive qualities of Neobule, who is said to actively desire the narrator (himeirei in v. 3) and to make many men her own. The narrator, though himself male and therefore appropriately the sexual aggressor, avoids the excesses connoted by oxuterê: he does not cross barriers, does not penetrate the maiden's tender skin.

14 Van Sickle ([a] 10ff) documents this with passages from the text. The "aristocratic ideal" of utter restraint most likely functions as a kind of foil for the poem's more earthy point of view. Certainly the tone of the epode is not stringently moralistic.
his more recent interaction with the maiden. He uses Neobule as poetic foil, exaggerating her faults in order to enhance the praise of the maiden. Second and perhaps more important, it offers a negative exemplum of excess for the narrator, who separates or isolates himself from Neobule’s excesses. By seeing Neobule as object the narrator is able to identify her lack of restraint as unattractive, unhealthy, and destructive. This recognition may enable him to act with more restraint. The last lines he speaks before he takes action would indicate as much (26-27).

Before suggesting a third, related function, I would like to elucidate how the narrator is depicted showing restraint toward the young maiden. The dialogue between pursuer and pursued is, in contrast to the enclosed invective, orderly and tightly logical. The narrator states his goal or intention (15): schêsô gar es poêphorous képous, “For I shall put in at the grassy gardens.” The preceding mé ti meïaire, “do not begrudge me at all”, is a plea for her confidence, a plea based on or explained by gar. His stated expectations are limited: he will be satisfied with one of the delights of the goddess (9), apart from the divine thing (10). I follow Van Sickle and West in interpreting these lines, accepting Hesychius’ gloss of exô tês mixêôs for parex to theion.

There follows a series of actions—none of them violent. Even if the maiden is subject of ephen (33), her unveiling would not necessarily, as Henderson asserts, signify her willingness to experience full intercourse. It may merely indicate that, perhaps trusting in his earlier promises (15 ff), she is ready to enjoy some of the pleasures of Aphrodite. The metaphor hēbês epêlusin, an apposition to neon chroa and the direct object of ephen, may well be polysemantic. One suggested interpretation, “approach”, is especially suitable: “she (or I) revealed her tender skin, approach to her Womanhood.” Epêlusin as “approach” makes the genitive noun hēbês more concrete, resonates with the gate metaphor (14) (emphasizing the skin as the passageway or port of entry), and delicately underscores the fact that the maiden’s skin (and thus, by metonymy, the maiden) is still intact. Moreover, these acts and

18This rhetorical technique is a natural one for erotic poetry; cf., for example, Catullus 86. Dr. Phyllis Katz has pointed out to me the role that exaggeration plays in Archilochus’ use of poetic foil in the fragment.


20S.R. Slings, “Three Notes on the New Archilochus,” ZPE 18 (1975) 170, convincingly interprets the nautical expression schêsô es as intransitive in this sense. The action depicted in this metaphorical expression is indecisive: the narrator promises no penetration will take place.

21E. Dagani, “Parex to Theion Chrêma nel nuovo Archilochi di Colonia,” QUCC 20 (1975) 229, was first to discover this gloss.

22Henderson (note 4 above, 173-4) assumes that “actual penetration . . . must follow the one action of the girl, namely her uncovering herself.” He sees this “defloration” as a “combination of gentleness and compulsion.” He argues, from other erotic contexts, that labôn ekîna and auchen” angkaleis echôn both indicate sexual force and compulsion. His main passage for comparison is the apate of Zeus passage in E, but Hera in that scene is hardly a helpless, innocent maiden! Moreover, Henderson’s notion that a “pretty girl overtaken in the meadows by a healthy young Greek cannot expect any sort of malthusian compromise or tender solicitude about her virginity” (169) is hardly consistent with what we know of Archaic Greek poetry.

23So Van Sickle argues ([b] 145-6).

24See my note 14 above and Van Sickle (ibid. 145), who states: the word chroa often refers to
expressions function together to heighten expectation and tension. Then the unexpected though promised release ante portas becomes even more poignant: "I let go my? (or my white?) life-force, just touching her tawny hair." The delicate participle epispauon further assures that no penetration has taken place. It contrasts with erotic verbs of a more decisive timbre, such as apokeirai and apodrepsai in Pindar's Pythian 9.22

By the poem's end the male pursuer is revealed as not oxuteros, not duplicitous and untrustworthy, not mainolis or epigomenos or guilty of koros. He is defined in terms of what he is not. He set out toward and reached his moderate goal, or perhaps modified his aims while en route; in either case, the goal as stated in the extant lines of the poem is a moderate one. The invective which occurs in an enclosed and tightly demarcated section23 dramatically releases him from resentments and excesses connected with Neobule, both in the actions he imputes to her and in his own interactions with her.24 In this sense the invective is cathartic for the abuser, enabling him to act (within the poem) in moderation. Thus the enclosed invective has at least three important functions: a rhetorical function through providing poetic foil for the narrator's arguments; a cognitive function through allowing the narrator to objectify and disown certain character traits ascribed to Neobule; and an emotional function through affording the narrator a cathartic outlet for his excessive feelings, whatever their cause.

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"the beautiful appearance of the skin of a woman or young person, or the tender flesh about to be pierced in battle." Expectation that this young maiden's tender skin, gateway to her womanhood, is about to be pierced (penetrated, violated) heightens the dramatic tension; the narrator's release ante portas is our release as well. His depiction of the maiden as vulnerable and delicate has won her our empathy.

22In The Maculate Muse. Obscene Language In Attic Comedy (New Haven 1975) Jeffrey Henderson lists verbs for sexual intercourse found in comedy (see summary, 44) and in iambic poetry (21-22). None is weak like epispauon. In his article, to support his notion of violence and compulsion he takes xanthês epispauon trichos as "stroking" [with his hand] her tawny [cephalic] hair" rather than as "touching her tawny [pubic] hair". I follow Van Sickle ([b] 149) in the latter interpretation, which seems more natural to the situation.

23The section is set off between what appear to be conventional transitional devices, a direct address to his interlocutor (16) and a warning to himself (26-27).

24See Van Sickle's citation ([b] 141, fn. 28) of "Professor Burnett's view of the poem (and genre) as an almost ritual purgation". This is in reference to the proverbial expression "To the crows! Keep her off!" (21)—an expression of rejecting and distancing from the realm of magic (ibid. 141). For an interesting discussion of the close association between invective and ridicule (including the Archilochian satiric iamb) and magic, see Robert C. Elliot, The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art (Princeton, NJ 1960). I am grateful to Ms. Harriet M. Deal for this citation.