

Introduction: the bitter Muse

*Et mea Musa potest proprio deprensa colore
insignis uitii forsitan esse suis.
Tam mala Thersiten prohibebat forma latere
quam pulchra Nireus conspiciendus erat.*

Maybe my Muse can be caught in her own hue,
marked by her shortcomings.
For Thersites' foul mien kept him from hiding,
as much as Nireus stood out for his beauty.
Ovid, *Ex Pont.* 4.13.13–16

Introduction

This book focuses largely on the memory and literary appropriation of Archilochus of Paros (7th century BCE) and his poetry from the first through the fifth centuries CE. The debased persona, themes and vocabulary that were remembered as being so central to archaic *iambos*, a form of poetry that Archilochus supposedly created, naturally drew the scorn of many later authors, but throughout these pages I maintain that the Archilochean biographical tradition, which consists of bits of his poetry combined with layers of legendary or semi-legendary accretions, offered a powerful dramatization of a narrative with universal appeal, namely the defense of ethical behavior after the transgression of communal norms. A well-known ancient tale about Archilochus, although it is not attested until centuries later, encapsulates this basic dynamic: Lycambes had sworn an oath that he would marry his daughter Neobule to Archilochus, but Lycambes reneged on his promise. As a result, Archilochus composed invective poems so savage that they drove Lycambes and his family to hang themselves. Some aspects of those poems were dangerously or shockingly transgressive, but those elements were conceived as a response to a remediation of a previous, unprovoked affront.

A similar story about Hipponax of Ephesus (6th century BCE) clearly derives from this tale about Lycambes' perfidy and is neatly summarized by Pliny (*NH* 36.4.12):

Hipponacti notabilis foeditas voltus erat; quam ob rem imaginem eius lascivia iocosam hi proposuere ridentium circulis, quod Hipponax indignatus destrinxit amaritudinem carminum in tantum, ut credatur aliquis ad laqueum eos compulisse.

Hipponax had a famously ugly face, for which reason [Bupalus and Athenis] maliciously displayed a ridiculous image of him to a laughing crowd. Hipponax in anger unleashed a poem of such bitterness that one might believe that he drove them to the noose.

The close similarity between these two stories that describe the personal impetus for composing *iambos* offers important insight into why later audiences linked these two poets so tightly. Both composed in iambic meters, to be sure, but so did various other figures, such as Solon of Athens, whose reputation is never conflated with these two quintessential iambists. Rather, the pattern that unites these aetiological narratives shows the poet being attacked without provocation, responding with a blistering poetic attack, and the subsequent (self-)punishment of those responsible. When authors of the imperial era incorporated recognizable elements of Archilochean or Hipponactean poetics into their own compositions, they most often did so in order to resurrect and reactivate this basic storyline. Invective language always articulates social boundaries, and the ancient authors studied here did so through various forms of discourse centered in the intersection between the lived experiences and poetic output of these poets from archaic Greece.

Horace's *Epodes*, published soon after the end of the Roman civil wars, regularly mark the final resting place of iambic poetry, that raunchy and dangerous mode first made famous in the archaic Greek world by Archilochus. Yet iambic poetics continued to exist after Horace and even acquired a new vitality in responding to the literary opportunities of the vast and variegated Roman Empire.¹ This vitality probably had a deep sociopolitical

¹ I need to define four closely related terms that will be used throughout this book, and for which I rely heavily on the terminological analysis of Rotstein 2010: ***iambos*** refers to those poems regularly included in the archaic genre and the most overt later continuers, such as Callimachus' *Iambi* and Horace's *Epodes*, but not the trimeters of Solon. ***Iambic mode*** provides a label for the compositional strategies of any work or passage that seems significantly engaged with *iambos*, e.g., many scenes from Old Comedy, as discussed by Rosen 1988a; certain fragments of Archilochus and Semonides fr. 1 seem to lack evidence of the iambic mode. ***Iambic poetics*** includes the notional compendium of all the "salient features" of *iambos*. Individual traits such as the narration of animal fables come from the repertoire of iambic poetics, but they can be found in literature not composed in the iambic mode (e.g., a fable in Aeschylus). Finally, the ***iambic tradition*** encompasses anything that relates to *iambos* in any way, such as an anecdote about an iambic poet or a quotation preserved by a lexicographer.

impulse behind it, since the figure of the iambist transgressed cultural categories by combining traits of the disempowered outsider (he is often ugly, obstreperous, rejected, driven out, ignoble, crass, or otherwise *πονηρός*) with a legendary verbal efficacy that supposedly impelled the targets of archaic *iambos* to suicide. Like Callimachus and Catullus, imperial era authors must have been attracted to the idea that words could be so tremendously efficacious.

This composite mask of the iambist, developed within the ritual and sympotic norms of small-scale archaic communities such as Paros and Thasos, afforded imperial authors the opportunity to play with the idea of standing outside the regular hierarchies and bureaucracies of Roman order. By donning the trappings of an Archilochus an author could comment upon those structures without running the risk of doing so in his own voice. In some cases, this process can be understood in reverse Nietzschean terms as an infusion of Dionysian disruptiveness into typically Apolline quadrants of imperial culture (formal, stylized oratory, Christian apology, etc.). As such, the iambic mode enabled moments of speaking truth to power in situations that demanded indirect lines of communication. This is not to say that all of the authors in this book were social radicals (some were clearly not), but rather that as each adopted and adapted iambic poetics to his own circumstances, the awkward breaches of decorum and propriety that this persona entailed fostered the opportunity to speak with the archaic iambist's dangerous and efficacious bluntness. The iambic persona also provided a certain immunity by foregrounding the iambist's voice as a ventriloquial trick. Much like fable (a genre intimately associated with *iambos*), the iambic mode can present the façade of a peripheral or marginalized figure speaking to someone ensconced in the center of society while putting some of the onus of interpretation onto its more powerful characters. But whereas fables induce laughter because of their wit and give pleasure because of their sweetness, iambic speech slaps the powerful in the face and cows them into submission with the memory of its murderous legacy.

Although many scholars have traced some part of the reception and reputation of iambic poetry into the imperial era, only a few have considered the possibility that iambic poetics continued to influence the compositional strategies of imperial authors.² My intention here, therefore,

² Miralles and Pòrtulas 1988, 71–119, deal with Hipponactean influences on Petronius; Agosti 2001 offers a rapid survey of many of the places one can find the *iambikè idea* in late antiquity; Zanetto 2003 shows how iambic poetics influenced certain elements of the Greek novel; and Rosen 2007b concludes his book with a chapter on Juvenal, though the similarities he finds between iambic poets and Roman satirists do not lead him to suggest that Juvenal was making any significant use of uniquely iambic compositional strategies.

is to draw upon evidence *about* the iambic tradition in order to analyze late texts that participate *in* that tradition in an era when the iambic mode was largely dissociated from any formal constraints.³ In the imperial era the iambic mode continues to be a vehicle for verbal aggression from a first-person speaker and directed at a second-person target. It also maintains the traditional prominence of low-register themes (sex, bodily functions, sub-heroic violence, etc.) and reveals a deep connection with the legends about the earliest iambic poets. Other matters, however, are new to the imperial context, such as an interest in the kalends of January, the Roman New Year's celebration, which Ovid, Lucian, and Julian draw into the dramatic settings of their iambic texts. The portentousness of the kalends may amount to a Roman substitution for the legendary magico-religious power of the archaic iambists' words. Perhaps even more interesting are those themes that have some tenuous connection with archaic *iambos* but which become more prominent in this later period. The monkey-like Cercopes, for example, seem to have been evoked in one extant bit of Archilochus (fr. 178; cp. fr. 313) and, according to Suetonius, were mentioned by Semonides (fr. 34), but they have far more significant roles in the invective strategies of all three prose authors in this book.⁴

Yet above all, imperial iambic modes are marked by their extreme flexibility and adaptability in form, content, and social context. The authors studied in this book wrote in prose and elegiac couplets as well as trimeters and choliambis; they wrote invective but also moralizing guides for behavior; they adopted the typically abject pose of an archaic iambist but also the arch superiority of a philosopher and the conviction of a Christian theologian. And they all lived in a world in which the autocratic power structures of the Roman Empire organized a great deal of everyday life and determined that expressions of personal rage and frustration could prove dangerous. Ovid, Dio Chrysostom and (effectively) Gregory Nazianzen all suffered exile; Dio, Babrius and Gregory had to adapt the low-register anger of the iambic tradition to the elevated spheres of their

³ That is to say that although we have a huge amount of evidence about the iambic tradition from the imperial era, the vast majority of it is primarily antiquarian (e.g., biographical details about or citations of iambic poets in texts that show no signs of activating an iambic mode). In the texts studied here, the authors draw programmatic inspiration for their own compositions from iambic poetics. They are doing *iambos*. The many texts of iambic authors found at Oxyrhynchus (see below, n. 56) offer important clues about the continued reading of iambic poetry into the Roman era.

⁴ All citations of the archaic iambists come from West's 1971 edition, though for Hipponax I also provide Degani's 1983 numbering.

philosophical, royal, and religious milieus; Lucian and (perhaps) Babrius had to prove their literary credentials by mastering the art of Hellenic literature to which they came as outsiders; and even Julian, who, as emperor, might seem to be above all such concerns for power hierarchies, found himself in a precarious position, both because his personal tastes were too extreme and austere for his empire and because his target audience in Antioch was careering toward revolt. Highlighting an iambic mode amounts to a high-stakes tightrope act, an opportunity to walk a thin line between risk and reward. My aim, then, is to examine a representative selection of texts from a variety of social and historical contexts that demonstrate the literary potential for imperial iambic poetics.⁵

To this end, I have chosen six authors, who clearly state their relationship with the iambic tradition, most often through a programmatic reference to Archilochus the arch-iambist. The nearly universal association between Archilochus and his poetic mode ensures that whatever *iambos* meant to a given author in a given era (and we should certainly not assume a diachronic stability for iambic poetics within the four centuries of imperial literature here surveyed), programmatic invocations of Archilochus demand that we appreciate these texts vis-à-vis the iambic tradition.⁶ Among the prose authors, the formula is simple and consistent: Dio's *First Tarsian Oration* (*Or.* 33), Lucian's *Pseudologista*, and Julian's *Misopogon* all include a declaration of fundamental similarity between the author and Archilochus. This is not to say that their presentations of Archilochus are accurate, but rather that they skew this simple equation to fit the demands of their particular situations. In the statement "I am like Archilochus," the final term serves as a variable (rather than a fixed historical constant) that allows each author to fashion an Archilochus like himself.⁷

Among the poets, the game becomes more coy and varied. Ovid denies any connection whatsoever between his *Ibis* and iambic poetry, but his explicit denial amounts to a *praeteritio* that activates the register he claims to eschew. Babrius sets his fables in the choliambic meter, which

⁵ My analysis is far from encyclopedic, cp. n. 1. The rich and fascinating intersection between iambic poetics and epigram, for example, deserves its own treatment, which would extend and narrow the discussion of Nisbet 2003.

⁶ Rotstein 2010 surveys a wealth of information about the diachronic ups and downs of the reputation of the iambic tradition, and she discusses many issues that derive from the imperial era.

⁷ Cf. Propertius' claim to be the "Roman Callimachus," a vaunt which attempts to plaster over Propertius' manipulation of his model.

announces his debt to the Hipponactean branch of iambic poetry, but he claims to have defanged the fierce bite of his meter's originally brutal nature. And in the case of Gregory's poems, it could be argued that his iambic trimeters have more to do with that meter's development into the standard vehicle for a huge range of chatty poetry than it does with an interest in *iambos*. And yet, given his fascination with synthesizing earlier poetic traditions (his use of Sappho and Callimachus is well documented), along with his first-person vitriol, which is a cornerstone of the iambic mode, and his admission that he had composed abusive iambic poetry in some contexts, it becomes increasingly probable that the poems I have selected out of his vast corpus draw their breath from an iambic source.

These texts do not, however, represent the sum total of imperial literature that was influenced by the iambic tradition. I do believe that they represent something of a reliable core group, however, beyond which such influences become more debatable, partial, attenuated, or veiled. The scoptic epigrams of Lucillius and Nicarchus, for example, present an ambivalent case for a strong iambic influence, though they clearly owe some debt, however distant and indirect, to the early iambists. Or again, Aelius Aristides markedly turns to Archilochus in his two major critiques of Plato (*Orr.* 2 and 3 Lenz-Behr = 45 and 46 Dindorf), but although he invokes Archilochus as a model of acceptable invective (supported by Apollo and attacking only those who deserved such treatment, *Or.* 3.610–12 Lenz-Behr = 46.293–94 Dindorf), he nevertheless does not go so far as to assimilate his voice to that of Archilochus as do all the prose authors studied here. Aristides, that is to say, keeps the iambic dog on a tight leash, rather than setting the beast loose. Yet in order to give some sense of where else iambic poetics can be found in imperial literature, I have appended an “interlude” to the end of each chapter that looks beyond that chapter's primary focus toward a related, more isolated, or more hypothetical case study. And whereas each chapter aims to pursue its arguments to a clear conclusion, these quick forays mean merely to break the ice and promote discussion about the place of the iambic tradition (or, indeed, various other similarly “outdated” poetic modes) in imperial literature.

Although the majority of these authors composed in Greek, it is important to recognize how poetic traditions cross the time-honored linguistic divide that continues to provide a basic organizational structure for the field of classical scholarship. Amidst the recurring themes and motifs that I have found among the iambic adaptations studied here, the one thing I do not see is a significant difference based on language. In terms

of their manipulation of iambic poetics, Lucian and Ovid, for example, seem to have plenty in common.⁸

Post-Horatian iambic poetics

From archaic Greece to Augustan Rome, iambic poetry sparked contentious debates among poets and critics alike for its use of aggressive invective, graphic depictions of sex, and picaresque adventures.⁹ Already with Pindar, we find Archilochus and his poetry being spurned in what amounts to a cross-generic battle between high-register epinician and low-register *iambos* played out in terms of each poet's persona. From Pindar's perspective, Archilochus is dangerous, out of control, spouting venom, unhealthy, and on the margins of society, whereas Pindar himself aims to maintain his distance from such social contagion by sticking close to his aristocratic patrons and avoiding everything that the long-dead Archilochus represents. It is important that Pindar recasts this generic rivalry in terms of a physical line of sight that is chronologically impossible but programmatically powerful (*Pyth.* 2.52–56):

ἐμὲ δὲ χρεὼν
 φεύγειν δάκος ἀδινὸν κακαγοριᾶν.
 εἶδον γὰρ ἐκὰς ἑὼν τὰ πόλλ' ἐν ἀμαχανίᾳ
 ψογερόν Ἀρχίλοχον βαρυλόγοις ἔχθεσιν
 πταινόμενον.

I must flee the swarming bite of slander.
 For I've seen him from afar in great distress –
 bilious Archilochus fattening himself
 on heavy words of hate.

Although such disparaging comments do not tell the whole story of what archaic *iambos* actually was, they became the negative pole of its later reputation.¹⁰ As with most ancient *vitae*, the biographical lore about Archilochus and the other iambists consists primarily of extrapolations from narratives found in their poetry. Inevitably, then, many of the

⁸ This is not to say that no differences exist. As Morgan 2010, 114–121, shows, the story of Roman iambics becomes muddled by Catullus and his legacy. By the time we get to Martial and Persius, therefore, the *iambikê idea* can be found in a variety of meters. For the persistent connection between abuse and the choliamb in Martial, however, see P. Watson 2006.

⁹ Bowie 2001b and 2008 has greatly clarified our understanding of how such narratives function in archaic *iambos*.

¹⁰ As discussed in detail by Rotstein 2010.

arguments in this book have more to do with the sediment of cultural memory about iambic poets and their poetry than with historical realities, but once we get beyond a fascination with origins, such sediment becomes the only reality worth talking about.

After Horace's *Epodes*, iambic poetics became unmoored from its formal roots. This process had already begun with Old Comedy and Catullus, but in the imperial era the "bitter Muse," as Gaetulicus described Archilochean *iambos*, became more diffuse.¹¹ Like the various colors of a pinwheel, the imperial instantiations of iambic poetics take on unique hues even as they can all be traced back to the same source. Thus the authors studied here present a great deal of variation both in terms of their relationship to each other (Ovid and Julian, for example, would seem to be an odd couple indeed if it were not for the other authors who cushion the jarring juxtaposition) and with their iambic models (Babrius' moralizing revival of the choliamb shares few overt traits with Lucian's rage).

A basic but important example of this variety can be found in these authors' speaking personas. Ovid and Lucian most nearly recoup the personal rage of the seething archaic iambist; Gregory is, in some poems, deeply angry as well, but his Christian scruples smooth away the coarsest edges; Julian complains that the tastes of his era won't allow him fully to become Archilochus, a point that makes him seem every bit the social misfit that the people of Antioch accuse him of being; Dio takes up the Archilochean mantle but does so as a purely ethical move that is devoid of personal animus; and Babrius all but runs away from any association with an iambic model even as he can't stop talking about the old sting and bite of his chosen choliambic form.¹²

This variegation of the imperial iambic persona is easy to recognize if one reads the texts assembled here with an eye to the iambic tradition. But

¹¹ The argument that Old Comedy was deeply influenced by the iambographic tradition is now well established following Rosen 1988a, though Bowie 2002b sets out important counterarguments. Heyworth 2001 demonstrates the way in which Catullus often splits his poems in iambic form from those with strong thematic connections with archaic *iambos*. Now see also Morgan 2010, 121–58.

¹² A long association between *iambos* and the sting of the wasp lies behind Babrius' comment. Callimachus (fr. 380 Pf.) says that "Archilochus drew in the dog's pungent bile and the wasp's sharp sting"; Leonidas of Tarentum (3rd century BCE, *AP* 7.408) calls Hipponax a "bitter wasp" (πικρὸς σφήξ); Gaetulicus (1st century CE, *AP* 7.71) describes wasps around Archilochus' tomb. Perhaps also relevant are Pindar's description of the "bite" (δάκος) of Archilochean slander (*Pyth.* 2.53), Anacreon's attack on Artemon, who wears something on his head that is ἐσφηκωμένα, which surely implies "tightly wrapped" but which literally refers to anything having to do with a wasp (fr. 338.1 *PMG*), and a line from Cratinus' *Archilochoi* (fr. 2 *PCG*): οἶον σοφιστῶν σμήνος ἀνεδιφήσατε, "such a swarm of sophists you've scrounged up." Katz 2007 contrasts "Archilochus the wasp" with "Horace the honeybee."

these authorial moves are far from being simple assumptions of an old iambist's voice, a fact that should alert us to other manipulations of the iambic tradition that are less obvious, especially in light of our limited information about archaic poets and poetry. If, for example, Dio's philosophical Archilochus turns out to be a willful and intentional manipulation of what the best educated members of his audience knew about the Parian iambist, then why shouldn't we suspect that Orodicides, the enemy of Semonides who is attested only in one passage of Lucian, has been invented for rhetorical effect? Or that Lucian has not also invented what we know as Archilochus fr. 223, in which the Parian compares himself to a cicada, since this too is preserved only in the same passage?¹³ Or again, should Ovid's description of Archilochus dying because of his own words be taken as a *recherché* variation on standard biographical lore, as it is sometimes described, or a creative innovation? As these unique pieces of evidence pile up, an important distinction emerges within imperial literature. While some authors were clearly interested in chronicling and preserving information about the iambic tradition via some form of antiquarianism (lexica, scholia, etc.), others sought to insert themselves into the annals of classical literature by producing works that touched upon the iambic tradition and that did more than rearrange what ancient scholars knew about that tradition. So whereas writers like Pollux and Clement are surely far more reliable witnesses to the history of Greek literature, we should be more circumspect about historicizing information garnered from an Ovid or a Dio. As we make our way through the texts and contexts of the ensuing chapters, therefore, we should be attuned to iambic poetics as a still vibrant, flexible, oppositional, irreverent, and often mischievous literary mode, that could be intensified or softened at will.

Slurring Thersites' words: dissimulated iambic poetry (Chapters 1–3)

The first three chapters of this book deal with manifestations of the iambic mode in poetry. *Iambos* had always been poetic, but the authors studied in these chapters all turn away from the stock association between iambic form and content. What unites Ovid's *Ibis*, Babrius' choliambic fables, and

¹³ Given Lucian's popularity throughout the Byzantine era, references to this line by Constantinus Rhodius (*Anecd. Gr.* p. 628, 36 Matrangia) and Leo Philosophus (*ibid.* 557, 25) may follow Lucian rather than deriving from Archilochus' poetry. Bossi 1990, 226–34, discusses fr. 223 in great detail.

certain poems in iambic trimeters by Gregory Nazianzen, in fact, is their combination of an overt denial of any iambic agenda with a pronounced reliance on iambic poetics. Although rejections of iambic poetics and satirical aggression had a long history prior to the imperial era, these authors make generic dissimulation a centerpiece of their literary undertakings. Such dissimulation grows out of a long tradition of pushing away iambic poetry. This habit can be traced back to the archaic era – possibly even to Homeric poetry.

Through the work of Detienne and Dumézil modern scholars now regularly understand the opposition between poetic praise and blame to reflect a deep structure in Indo-European cultures, including classical antiquity.¹⁴ This, in turn, has provided the foundation for interpretations of the confrontation between Thersites and Odysseus in the second book of the *Iliad* in terms of some sort of discourse between traditions of praise and blame, perhaps even between epic and *iambos*.¹⁵ In this scene, Thersites appears as an overdetermined vituperative monster (similar in some respects to Archilochus' stocky general in fr. 114, Hipponax's ugly persona, and Pindar's description of Archilochus in *Pyth.* 2). Thersites is hideous, hateful to the best Achaean leaders, and ready to say anything that will get a laugh out of the army. Most interestingly for my purposes, however, he is also described as ἀμετροεπής (2.212), literally "of unmeasured words." This term clearly refers to a lack of moderation in Thersites' speech, but Martin has shown that his verses are also marked by "massive correption," which produces a pronounced slurring in his speech and thus depicts Thersites as "without *meter*."¹⁶ This description of Greek literature's first satirist reveals a near disjunction between his rhythms and his content – Thersites' aggressive, low-register attack threatens to mangle the Homeric hexameter with its (and his) inappropriateness. From Thersites to the poets studied here we can map out a history of the deformations, rejections, modifications, and denials of iambic modes, all of which highlight problems in the relationship between form and content or in the social acceptability of such content in any form.

After Thersites, the satirist whose low-register and abusive words sully the Homeric hexameter, we next see a rejection of such poetics by Archilochus himself, though the exact implications of his words are not clear.

¹⁴ Dumézil 1943 made this point for Indo-European studies; Detienne 1996, 18–27, gave the theory currency for Greek culture and poetry.

¹⁵ Rosen 2007b, 67–116, provides an updated discussion and bibliography on this topic.

¹⁶ Martin 1989, 112–13, with original emphasis.