

A Metrical Joke in ‘Theognis’?

Two passages of the *Theognidea* share an interesting peculiarity (611-14, 693-94):¹

οὐ χαλεπὸν ψέξαι τὸν πλησίον, οὐδὲ μὲν αὐτὸν
αἰνῆσαι· δειλοῖς ἀνδράσι ταῦτα μέλει.
σιγᾶν δ’ οὐκ ἐθέλουσι κακοὶ κακὰ λεσχάζοντες,
οἱ δ’ ἀγαθοὶ πάντων μέτρον ἴσασιν ἔχειν.

It’s not hard to find fault with your neighbour nor indeed to praise oneself; these things are the concern of base men. The base, with their base gossip, refuse to be silent, but the noble know how to observe due measure in all things.

πολλοὺς τοι κόρος ἄνδρας ἀπώλεσεν ἀφραίνοντας·
γνῶναι γὰρ χαλεπὸν μέτρον, ὅτ’ ἐσθλὰ παρῆ.

Excess has ruined many foolish men; it’s difficult to recognize a limit, whenever prosperity is at hand.

It may well be a coincidence, but it is interesting that someone (or some two) would write about the difficulty of knowing the measure or μέτρον in two pentameters, each of which comes immediately after a spondaic hexameter. The quadrisyllabic endings λεσχάζοντες (614) and ἀφραίνοντας (694) do make the meter a bit harder to recognize.² On the other hand, LSJ⁹ gives the earliest use of μέτρον in the sense ‘metre’ as Aristophanes, *Clouds* 638, more than two centuries after Theognis’ *floruit*. Also, if we suppose that a fifth-foot spondee makes the quality (dactylic) rather than the quantity (hexameter) harder to discern, there is another hitch: commentators on the *Clouds* (Dover and Sommerstein) argue that even then dactylic would be the ῥυθμός, hexameter the μέτρον. So perhaps we should put this down as an inadvertent bilingual pun. Then again, both passages seem to be ‘school of Theognis’, which undercuts both counterarguments, perhaps fatally.

¹ Text and translation are quoted from D. E. Gerber’s Loeb, *Greek Elegiac Poetry* (1999), omitting the variants in the second passage. What counts as a separate poem in the nearly 700 elegiac couplets that have come down under the name of Theognis, and which parts were written by the historical Theognis of Megara, are notoriously difficult questions, on which I have no opinion. M. L. West (*IEG* [1971] I) puts ‘Theognidis’ on neither of these, so I call them passages of the *Theognidea* rather than poems of Theognis.

² At least in the first case, the meter looks illustrative: four long syllables to describe the base men lounging around in the λέσχη.