CLOSURE IN GREEK AND ROMAN EPIGRAM

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1] Closure is a topic of enduring critical attention for scholars of both ancient and modern literature, who ask both how, and to what extent, the structure and content of a work prepare a reader for its end, and how 'satisfying' that ending is when it comes [**2, 4, 11, 13**]. It is a particularly important topic for readers of epigram, a genre especially associated with concision, finality and permanence because of its inscriptional background (→ inscription): "As a statement that must define its subject for all time, and in a form short enough to be engraved on stone, the epigram developed the distinctive traits not only of brevity and restraint but also of appearing to have the last word" [**5**, *8*]; epigram is thus often regarded as the genre of maximal closure [**13** *196-210*]. Its → *brevitas*, moreover, ensures that its readers encounter endings constantly on both a micro- and macroscopic level: we experience the close not only of individual poems, but also of sequences of epigrams, of → epigram books and even of multi-book collections. To signal endings at all these different levels, epigram writers and collectors had a wide repertoire of structural and thematic techniques at their disposal, which they variously manipulated to provoke, satisfy, or frustrate an audience's expectation of closure.

2] → Structure is a particularly powerful tool for conveying closure. At the most basic level, → metre can contribute to a sense of finality through the expectations aroused by its regularity – in the elegiac couplet (the most common epigrammatic metre), the regular interplay of hexameter and pentameter enacts a small-scale resolution every two lines: it would be jarring to end with a hexameter half way through a couplet, while it is more satisfying and familiar to conclude with the pentameter. In particular, the simultaneous conclusion of couplet and sentence at verse end adds a strong note of finality, especially after much enjambement (e.g. *AP* VII, 716). On a larger scale, closure can also be enhanced by two seemingly contradictory urges: the urge for repetition, and the urge for divergence. Ring composition is the most common representative of the former, a device derived from oral poetry in which the end of a poem echoes its opening, comprehensively framing the whole. The technique is visible in epigram both within and across poems, and it can take a lexical (παρθενίης/παρθένε framing Asclepiades *AP* V, 85), thematic (Posidippus' ἀνδριαντοποιικά opening and closing with comparisons of Lysippus and Polyclitus, 62 & 70 A-B), or structural form (Martial II, 41 ending by rewriting the Ovidian quotation with which it opens: *ride, si sapis, o puella, ride - plora si sapis, o puella, plora*); it can also form part of a larger thematic and structural patterning across epigram sequences [e.g. **9** on Martial 1.112-118]. Divergence, by contrast, is exemplified by epigrammatic → *pointe*, the tendency (especially in later epigram) for poems to conclude with a variously humorous, witty or unexpected reversal of the situation described or resolution of an apparent paradox, often with a pun, *sententia* or joke. Alongside these overarching features, epigrams also often close with prayers (e.g. *AP* V, 17), echoing the closing structure of cletic hymns and looking to the

future beyond the end of the poem, while epigram collections frequently close with a *sphragis*, both a 'seal' of authorship and a programmatic reflection on poetry itself (e.g. Cat.116, Martial 2.93, 7.99, perhaps Nossis *AP* VII, 718).

3] Beyond structure, epigrammatists also thematised the act of closure more allusively through motifs evoking a sense of finality and stability (a technique they share with poets of many other genres and periods [**13**, *172-182*; **15**]). Individual epigrams sometimes close with a direct reference to termination or surfeit: e.g. Martial's *finit* ('finishes', 13.36.2) and *satis* ('enough', 4.89, 7.99) or Claudian's land 'enclosed' by the sea (*clauditur*, *Carm.Min.*2.5) [**3**, *136*] – a word which may also form a closural signature by playing on the poet's name. But more frequently, closure may be signalled through features of human existence which themselves mark endings: cases of departure, homecoming, sleep, death, dusk and night. So, for example, Martial closes Book 10 by bidding his book 'farewell' for its journey (*vale, libelle*, 10.104.18), playing on epigrams' common address to a passing reader in similar terms (χαῖρε, *vale*), while Macedonius the Consul ends *AP* VI, 69 with the sailor Crantas enjoying 'fearless sleep' (ἄτρομον ὕπνον) after the completion of his many sea voyages; cf. too Antiphilus' dedication of his felt-hat as a 'symbol of wayfaring' (ὁδοιπορίης σύμβολον), perhaps representing his poetic *œuvre* as a completed journey (*AP* VI, 199) [**6**, *361-2*; **7**, *140-141*]. Death, in particular, the ultimate end of human life, often conveys such closural resonance, drawing particular point from the sympotic *topos* of the brevity of life [**12**] and the original funerary function of many inscribed epigrams: so, e.g., Rufinus' exhortation of Prodice ends with the threat of 'old age and the end that is death' (*AP* 5.12.4, γῆρας...καὶ τὸ τέλος θάνατος), while Asclepiades closes *AP* 12.50 by euphemistically noting that we will all soon 'rest for the long night' (τὴν μακρὰν νύκτ ᾽ἀναπαυσόμεθα). Similarly, a → poet-editor is often thought to have concluded an epigram book or collection with a self-epitaph, employing the common *topos* of the co-existence of a poet's life and work and thereby producing an emphatic conclusion which stands as a foil to a collection's introductory → preface (e.g. Meleager *AP* VII, 417-19; Callimachus *AP* VII, 415; Leonidas *AP* VII, 715). Balancing this emphasis on termination and finality, however, motifs of stability and permanence could also convey effective closure by heightening the sense of a secure future, especially in the Christian epigrams of *AP* I, with their interest in the promise of eternal life (e.g. βίον ἄφθιτον, 'imperishable life', *AP* I, 46). Alongside all these thematic motifs, a sense of closure could also be heightened through avoidance of qualification and the use of absolutes, universals or superlatives, which all imply that nothing more could be said on a topic, thus conveying comprehensiveness and completion: so e.g. πάντας, 'all' (Leonidas *AP* VII, 715, 6).

4] Epigrammatists could also mark their ends even more self-consciously. Particularly striking are several cases in which poets allude to the *coronis*, the diacritical sign commonly used to mark the end of a book or section in ancient papyri: Philodemus, for example, hurrying towards closure, asks the Muses to write his *coronis* as quickly as possible (*AP* XI, 41, 7, cf. Martial X, 1, 1), while Meleager even features a ventriloquised *coronis* in *AP* XII, 257, a poem commonly thought to have concluded his whole *Garland* [**5**, *279-281*]. It is replete with closural allusions in its images of the 'final turning post' (πύματον καμπτῆρα), unity (ἐκ πάντων...εἰς ἕνα, 'from all into one'), accomplishment (ἐκτελέσαι, 'to complete'), and the 'finish line' (τέρμασιν), alongside its ring composition echoes of *AP* IV, 1, 1-4 [**14**, *65-6*]. But these are all trumped by the presence of the talking *coronis*, which exploits a reader's

familiarity with poetry book conventions to heighten a sense of closure [**7**, *172-6*]; cf. too the anonymous poem appended to a 1ˢᵗ century AD *Iliad* papyrus, which similarly contains a talking *coronis*: ἐγὼ κορωνίς εἰμι γραμμάτων φύλαξ ("I am the *coronis*, the guardian of letters", *P.Lit.Lond.*11). More obliquely, the last poem of Martial's *Xenia* has also been thought to pun on the *coronis* in its reference to *coronae* ('garlands', 13.127) [**10**, *95-6, n.186*]. Beyond such references to this physical mark of closure, however, poets could also self-consciously allude to the endings of other works to enhance closure through association. Posidippus' *Lithika*, for example, close with an appeal to Poseidon to keep Ptolemy's land 'unshaken' (ἀκινήτην, 20, 6 AB), a prayer which echoes and literalises Bacchylides' similar request to Zeus on behalf of Hieron (ἀκινήτους, Bacch. *Épinicies* 5, 200).

5] However, intimations of closure do not always coincide with the end of a work. Poets also exploited these same motifs and techniques at other points in their *oeuvres*, especially in larger epigram collections. There is often a strong closural feel, for example, at the midpoint of epigram books, lending weight to the halfway point and preparing for the quasi new-beginning of a following "proem in the middle". At the midpoint of the *Carmina Priapea*, for example, the courtesan Telethusa (whose name evokes the Greek word for 'end', τέλος) crowns Priapus' *phallus* with a garland (*corona*), punning again on the consummating function of the *coronis* (*Priap.* 40); alongside the ring composition in *Priap.* 3/38 and 4/37, these closural hints pave the way for the implicitly proemial *recusatio* of *Priap.*41 [**8**, *248-9*]. Such cases contribute to the larger structuring of a complex work, but there are also other situations in which closural hints are simply misleading and seem designed to trick or tease a reader with the prospect of false closure. Martial 8.3, for example, begins by expressing Martial's reluctance to continue composing epigrams, with direct references to ending and surfeit (*satis*, 'enough'; *finis*, 'finish'; *finieram*, 'I had finished'), alongside an allusion to the close of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (VIII, 3, 7, *Met.*XV, 877-8). Such closural hints are extremely jarring set against its position near the very start of book 8, particularly following a poem on Janus, the god of beginnings and endings: these intimations of closure trick and tease a reader's expectations [**8**, *254-8*]. Similarly, in Martial's ninth book, the extremely closural 9.101 is unexpectedly followed by a small, additional poem (102) which deflates the expectations established by the former epigram in a pointed anti-climax [**10**, *207*]. As with any other poetic tool, closural techniques could thus be readily exploited and manipulated to challenge and surprise readers. Moreover, closure could also be frustrated in various other ways: the ordering and arrangement of epigrams might vary from collection to collection [**1**], and a reader might not read a whole collection linearly, from start to finish (cf. Martial XIV, 2, 1). It may thus be worth treating closural markers with healthy scepticism, and not necessarily regarding them as wholly reliable guides for reconstructing the precise structure of earlier, now lost poetry books. Ultimately, after all, closure is in the eye of the beholder.

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