

INTRODUCTION

Some epics need no introduction. The *Odyssey* is a ripping yarn for any reader. The *Iliad*'s insight into the human condition offsets much of its violence and slow plot-pacing. There is much more to Homer than that, of course: these epics have nearly limitless depths of poetic richness and historical significance, and that is where the scholarship comes into its own – the philology, the literary criticism, the linguistics, the archaeology.

But not all early Greek hexameter poetry is so accessible. Many people can read and enjoy the Hesiodic *Theogony* without preface; some of the major Homeric *Hymns* too. But the *Works and Days* is tough going for general readers, and stepping into the world of fragments can be like trying to find your way in a hospital where there are no signs, no coloured lines to follow, and all the doors are shut. These things need guidance.

Things have become much easier in the last fifteen years thanks to new Loeb editions, edited by M. L. West (2003a, 2003b) and Glenn Most (2006, 2007), of Hesiodic, hymnic, heroic, and antiquarian poetry. Previously, Anglophone readers had to rely on Evelyn-White's (1914) edition, which had been obsolete for a long time. The present volume takes advantage of Most's and West's texts and translations. For specialists, the biggest consequence of this is the use of Most's numbering of the Hesiodic fragments, rather than the more widely cited Merkelbach–West numbering. For non-specialists, a more pressing consequence is that this book gives Greek names in Latin translation, following the practice of the Loeb editions. For poems not included in the Loeb editions – oracles, Orphic poems, inscriptions, and so on – I supply my own translations.

This survey's main aim is to make the esoteric not easy, perhaps, but at least accessible. Its secondary aim is to emphasize that there was a tremendous amount of poetic material that we *do not* have, and that what remains to us is only a very partial reflection of a much larger reality. All Greek is translated. The gentlest part of the book is Chapter V, which gives an introduction to fragments targeted at the lay reader or apprentice classicist.

In a few places, these two aims mean abandoning the format of discursive prose. Like a reader embarking on the *Iliad* for the first time, you should be warned: there are catalogues ahead – of Archaic

hexameter inscriptions (pp. 31–2); of evidence for the existence of ancient editions in which poems were excerpted or spliced together (pp. 112–26); and of modern editions of fragmentary poems (Appendix, pp. 127–33). These are not intended as exercises in boring the reader, but as cheat-sheets. Some other topics demand technical details: so also lying in wait for you are some sample formal analyses of genre conventions (Chapter II); linguistic details about early Greek dialects and their impact on the epic tradition (Chapter III); tuning in ancient Greek music (Chapter IV); and the mysteries of Hellenistic mythology (Chapter V). These sections are more selective.

Homer is already covered in the ‘New Surveys’ series by Richard Rutherford’s sublime book of the same name (1996), recently republished in an expanded edition (2013). The present book tries to avoid overlapping with Rutherford, but there are places where it would make no sense to skirt around the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: for example, when discussing the prehistory of the epic tradition (Chapter III) or relationships between poems (Chapter VI). In those contexts Homer is usually the starting point for modern scholarship, and it would be silly to pretend otherwise.

Another matter that needs to be highlighted before we begin is the odd nature of the authorial persona in early Greek literature. Someone who has started to read this book is probably already aware that there are many poems that we call ‘Hesiodic’ but that cannot possibly be assigned to a historical individual of that name, either because the poems are too late, or because ancient sources were already sceptical of Hesiod’s authorship, or for some other reason: they include the *Shield*, the *Catalogue of Women*, the *Astronomy*, the *Melampodia*, and half a dozen more. This is not just a Hesiodic problem: he is only the most visible example.

Once upon a time, the way of dealing with this was to divide the world of hexameter poetry into ‘Ionian’ and ‘Boeotian’ schools, with Homer and Hesiod as their respective models.¹ So the *Shield* was not by Hesiod himself, but was composed by one of his intellectual heirs; the *Hymn to Apollo* was not by Homer but one of the ‘Homeridae’, a group of poets based on Chios. The binary division was especially tidy thanks to a text called the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*, an account

¹ Evelyn-White 1914: xi–xxxiii.

of a poetic duel, which helpfully frames Homer and Hesiod as two poles of a universe of poetry. In its surviving form the *Contest* dates to the second century CE, but it is based on material by the fourth-century-BCE writer Alcidas, who in turn drew on older traditions; the poetic duel in Aristophanes' *Frogs* between Aeschylus and Euripides played on the same material.²

The trouble is that there is no hard and fast distinction to be drawn between the 'Homeric' and 'Hesiodic' corpuses. If we were to plot the two corpuses on a spectrum ranging from 'heroic' to 'didactic', or 'narrative' to 'non-narrative' or what have you, we would inevitably end up with miscategorizations. The 'Hesiodic' *Shield* and *Catalogue of Women* have much more in common with the *Iliad* than the *Works and Days*; the Homeric *Hymns* are much more like cosmogonic poetry than heroic legend. 'Hesiod' was supposedly Aeolian, yet 'Homer' and 'Hesiod' both represent a tradition of Ionic poetry.

The modern solution is subtly different. Homer and Hesiod were not models for well-defined poetic genres: they were more like *appellations d'origine*. Poets could adopt a persona and 'be' Homer or Hesiod. The classic case is in the *Hymn to Apollo* (166–73):

χαίρετε δ' ὑμεῖς πάσαι· ἐμεῖο δὲ καὶ μετόπισθε
 μνήσασθ', ὅπποτε κέν τις ἐπιχθονίων ἀνθρώπων
 ἐνθάδ' ἀνείρηται ξείνος ταλαπείριος ἐλθών·
 ὦ κούραι, τίς δ' ὑμῖν ἀνὴρ ἦδιστος ἀοιδῶν
 ἐνθάδε πωλεῖται, καὶ τέωι τέρπεσθε μάλιστα;³
 ὑμεῖς δ' εὖ μάλα πάσαι ὑποκρίνασθαι ἀφήμωσ·
 ἄτυφλός ἀνὴρ, οἰκεῖ δὲ Χίῳ ἐνὶ παιπαλοέσσηι·
 τοῦ πάσαι μετόπισθεν ἀριστεύουσιν ἀοιδαί.⁴

Think of me in future, if ever some long-suffering stranger comes here and asks, 'O Maidens, which is your favorite singer who visits here, and who do you enjoy most?' Then you must all answer with one voice(?), 'It is a blind man, and he lives in rocky Chios; all of his songs remain supreme afterwards.'

If there is one thing everyone knows about Homer, it is that he was blind.³ Simonides (late sixth to early fifth century BCE) identifies the 'Chian man' with Homer more explicitly.⁴ The *Hymn to Apollo* is a sixth-century poem attributed to Cynaethus, so there is no question

² On the *Contest* and the Homer–Hesiod dichotomy see especially Graziosi 2002: 164–200; Debiasi 2012: 478–93. On early material in the *Contest* see N. Richardson 1981; Rosen 2004.

³ See further Graziosi 2002: 125–63.

⁴ Simon. frs. eleg. 19–20 West² (see Sider 2001 on the link between the fragments).

of the poem being by a historical Homer: instead Cynaethus adopts the persona of Homer to subscribe to a particular heritage. And that can just as easily be a *cultural* as a *poetic* heritage.

Another case that is hard to miss is in Homer himself, *Odyssey* 8, when the blind poet Demodocus is treated with great honour in the court of Alcinous, and is called ‘divine’, ‘trusty’, and ‘very famous’.⁵ If ‘Homer’ is more persona than person, this is not authorial self-injection but it is at least narratorial self-injection.

If ‘Homer’ can be played on as a persona *even within Homer*, Homer the real person barely matters. The mythologized biographical tradition, embodied in the *Contest* and in the *Lives* of Homer, was always more important than any historical individual of that name.⁶ So it becomes much harder to take the Hesiodic speaker at face value when he tells a story about how ‘Hesiod’ was visited by the Muses and given the gift of poetry (*Theog.* 22–34); or when he says that he once went to Euboea to win a poetry competition (*WD* 650–9), the same setting we see again in the mythologized *Contest*. The origins of the names illustrate their nature as personas too: Hesiod is ‘he who sets out on a journey’ or ‘he who enjoys the journey’, *hēsi-* (from ἦσι or ἦδομαι) + *hod-*; Homer is ‘he who fits (songs) together’, *hom-* + *ār-* – or, in one recent argument, a title meaning ‘agonistic, competitor’.⁷

A novice’s perspective finds this hard to swallow. Surely biographical traditions can only weigh in *favour* of a historical individual’s existence, not *against* it? It gets easier if we compare other poets who are much more obviously inventions. For there are many. No-one would dream of taking Orpheus and Musaeus as historical figures, yet there were unquestionably real poems dating to the Archaic period that were attributed to them. One of them, we know, was written by Onomacritus, adopting the persona of Musaeus.⁸ Linus and Epimenides are at least semi-mythical – Linus was a son of Apollo or took part in a musical contest with Apollo; Epimenides reportedly went to sleep for half a century – yet we have fragments of their poetry. Heracleides of Pontus treated three mythical poets in Homer – Thamyris, Demodocus, and Phemius – as

⁵ Graziosi 2002: 138–42.

⁶ For major studies on Homer and Hesiod as poetic personas see Graziosi 2002, 2013 (Homer); Koning 2010: 129–59 (Hesiod).

⁷ Nagy 1979: 296–300 (ἦδομαι: Most 2006: xiv). Debiasi 2012 links Ὀμηρος to Ὀμάριος, a cult-title of Zeus (‘god of the assembly’) and a fifth-century Euboean personal name (*JG* XII.9 56.135 Ἠομῆριος).

⁸ Hdt. 7.6 (=Orphica fr. 1109 Bernabé).

historical figures, and it is possible that he knew poems attributed to them.⁹ An extreme case is Abaris of Hyperborea. There were several poems attributed to him; and at least one, which pre-dated Herodotus' time (probably the one called *Apollo's Arrival among the Hyperboreans*), gave him a backstory as a Hyperborean priest of Apollo who travelled around Greece flying across rivers and mountains on the giant arrow with which Apollo had killed the Cyclopes.¹⁰

In other genres, too, there are poets who may possibly have been real historical individuals, but whose biographical tradition is so mythologized, so contaminated by fictional material, that the persona takes precedence over any reality. Among melic poets, Terpander was a hook on which all manner of musical firsts were hung, not least the invention of the *barbitos*, the most popular type of lyre for amateurs in the Classical period; Olympus, who invented the *aulos*, supposedly lived before the Trojan War.

In recent years scholars have been edging towards a recognition that some major lyric poets fall into this category too. Sappho and Solon are also both more persona than person.¹¹ The wildly romanticized biographical tradition of Sappho, leaping to her death over her unrequited love for Phaon, is obviously invented rather than historical; yet we are told that the love affair was there in 'Sappho's' own poems.¹² The oxymoron – that a rich biographical tradition only reinforces the impression of poet-as-persona – is well exemplified by a major new Sappho fragment discovered in 2014. There 'Sappho' talks to a family member about the doings of Charaxus and Larichus, her brothers; in the biographical tradition they are regularly grouped with a third brother, Erigyius, so Erigyius is presumably the purported addressee of the poem.¹³ But this ostentatious dwelling on Sappho's family life is not incidental, not just a lucky corroboration of the biographical tradition: it is inescapably a *purposeful demand* to be interpreted as 'Sappho'. Similarly, when 'Solon' repeatedly stresses his identity as Solon, saying such things as 'I have come here in person as a herald',¹⁴ it is only

⁹ Heraclid. fr. 157 Wehrli.

¹⁰ Hdt. 4.36; Lycurg. fr. 14.5a Conomis; Eratosth. *Cat.* 29; *Suda* α.18 (= *New Jacoby* 34 T 1).

¹¹ Lardinois 1994; Irwin 2005b, esp. 132–55 and 263–88. See also Irwin 1998 on Archilochus.

¹² Sappho frs. 211(a), (b.i), (b.iii) Campbell/LP.

¹³ New fragment: Obbink 2014. Sappho's brothers: test. 1, 2, 14 Campbell. The vocatives Ἐρίγιε, ὄριγιε fit comfortably in the Sapphic stanza.

¹⁴ Solon fr. 1; similar emphasis on the speaker's identity as 'Solon' in frs. 2, 5; Plut. *Vit. Sol.* 14.2.

sensible to recognize that the speaker is not simply mentioning his identity in passing but ostentatiously laying claim to that identity: in Solon's case, adopting the persona of a revered sage so as to frame a political message. Whether these poets really were Sappho and Solon is scarcely relevant.

We cannot have a purely fictional Musaeus and a purely historical Hesiod. If poets could play-act one, they could play-act the other. The upshot is that we can infer essentially nothing about the real authors of these poems from the poems themselves. If later biographical traditions are already there within the poems – as in *Odyssey* 8, the *Theogony*, and Sappho – then it makes sense to speak of the narratorial voice as a 're-enacting I', as Nagy puts it.¹⁵

This poses historical problems. If we have two poems claiming the same *appellation d'origine* – say, the *Theogony* and *Works and Days* claiming to be spoken by 'Hesiod' – then not only must we hesitate over assigning them to a single poet but we cannot even make any assumptions about their relative dates. In the opening chapter, which surveys the major poems, we shall have to be especially cautious.

¹⁵ Nagy 1994: 20.