

Peter Gainsford, *Early Greek Hexameter Poetry. Greece & Rome. New surveys in the classics*. 43, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, 150 pages.

Early Greek Hexameter Poetry by Peter Gainsford is a thorough introduction to the corpus of Greek archaic poems. Gainsford concentrates mostly on the Epic Cycle, the Homeric Hymns, the Hesiodic and pseudo-Hesiodic poetry, but gives also a general account of less known pieces: the Chresmologoi and archaic hexameter inscriptions. The author wants to make the sources accessible to anyone who may find trouble in orienting himself or herself in the vast specialist literature. His idea is not only to present the archaic authors and their poems, but also to reflect on some important and still debated issues – such as the questions of genre, performance or relationship between the poems. Although the book is advertised as intended for both expert and beginner readers, it will be found more profitable by the latter. Its ideal target would be to my mind a non-specialist (an informed hobbyist) or a specialist-to-be (an undergraduate) interested in the subject. It is the first book to provide a vast introduction for the archaic hexameter poetry as a whole.

The first chapter ('Poems') provides a basic overview of the archaic Greek epic poems and their authors. Gainsford begins with some general notes on the possibilities (and problems) of dating the early hexameter poems and then proceeds to the description of each poem or group of poems. The chapter covers the *Theogony*, the *Works and Days*, the *Catalogue of Women*, the *Shield*, the Homeric Hymns, the oracles and hexameter epigraphic inscriptions (i. e. grave epitaphs and dedications). Each section contains a summary (with detailed references), a handful of modern interpretations and methodological notes. Especially useful is the catalogue of archaic hexameter epigraphic inscriptions – a tool not to be found anywhere else (as the editions of Greek inscriptions do not have a metrical index, which would facilitate to find specifically the hexameter inscriptions). Although

the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* play a crucial role in this book, this chapter does not include an overview of these poems. It is not an incomprehensible choice, as any interested reader can easily find a vast introductory literature on the subject. Still, an introduction to the full corpus of archaic poems made by one author would give the reader a more coherent image of the literature of this period.

The second chapter concentrates on the 'genre' of epic poems. It revolves around the question whether the early Greek hexameter poetry may be perceived as a genre and, if so, what could be its distinguishable features. Gainsford wants to inspect the generic elements that appear not only in Homer's poetry, but especially those featuring in other poems, so as to avoid the trap of defining the epic only by Homeric standards. Gainsford approach to the issue of epic genre is a 'bottom up' one, more precise and flexible than a 'top-down' approach (that is considering a specific poem as an archetype of a certain subgenre). Gainsford gives a list of themes and topics that he says can also be treated as sub-genres, including heroic narrative, wisdom poetry and cosmogony. This is followed by a list of sub-themes and major structural elements – hymn, type-scenes, genealogy, catalogue and invocation; and finally tropes and stylistic features. Yet nowhere in this chapter does Gainsford give a definition of genre that he presupposes. This is especially important as the definitions of genre are various and usually quite distant – (see for example the difference in the vision of genre between Nagy and Clay).¹ The catalogue of themes, though vast and apt, is not summed up. Because of this, the chapter provides rather a list of popular subjects in early Greek hexameter poems than a real attempt to characterize it as genre. Finally, there is no mention in this chapter of the oracles and epigraphic epitaphs and dedications as presented in the first chapter. This material is ignored in the later chapters as well.

The third chapter deals with the question of tradition and legends. It is divided into three sections – methodology, hexameter and dialects. The first section reflects on various ways of transmitting traditional stories. Gainsford points out the trap of seeing hexameter poetry as the only medium of mythical tradition and every reference to myth as an allusion to a specific poem. The Gigantomachy and Troilus story are set as examples of a mythical vase-motif that probably (though disputably) did not rely on a specific poem. He encourages the reader to take a broader perspective and lists the different ways in which the tradition was transmitted – specific hexameter poems (circulating in writing), oral epic legends, other poetic genres (such as Stesichorus lyric poems), oral non-poetic legend and

¹ G. Nagy, 'Epic as Genre', in M. Beissinger, J. Tylus, S. Wofford (eds), *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World*, Berkeley 1999, 21-32; J. Strauss Clay, 'The Homeric Hymns as Genre', in A. Faulkner (ed.), *The Homeric Hymns. Interpretative Essays*, Oxford 2011, 232-253.

finally pictorial tradition. The second section concentrates on hexameter formulae and their usage. Finally, Gainsford turns to the question of dialects – relics of older grammar, that can be found in a poem and which we can use in order to reveal the older layers of such a poem.

The fourth chapter covers the topic of performance, namely that of how, when and to whom the early poems were performed. Some readers of archaic poems may tend to look at them from a modern perspective, as of fixed texts read and analysed by an individual ancient reader, and to forget their usual context that should at all times influence the interpretation of a poem. The first part is more technical as the author deals with the musical instruments used, the rhythm of recitation, the melody and the pitch. This is followed by the important question of the context of performance. Describing the contexts of performance Gainsford bases mostly on the ways the poetry is sung within the archaic poems themselves – in the world of mythical men, but also the world of gods. Although his proposition of the agons as verbally aggressive contests comparable to modern rap battles does not seem to me well grounded in the literally sources of the period, he shows well how varied the potential performance contest could be – from big public religious events and courts gathering professional poets to the recently hotly debated more intimate and aristocratic sympotic context (with the Homeric Hymn to Hermes as a prime example). Gainsford omits, however, the question of the possible length of performed poems and techniques of memorization.²

The fifth chapter, ('Fragments'), is in fact a guidebook to reading and analysing texts that have been preserved to us fragmentarily. The very sensible technical and methodological considerations in this chapter will be found especially useful by a student or an inexperienced reader, as Gainsford introduces not only the proper way of approaching the fragmentary poems of this period, but the concept of fragments and their analysis in general. He starts by giving an introduction on how to orient oneself in an edition of a fragmentary text. The different sections of such an edition are explained – the testimonia, the quotations, papyrus and vestigial fragments (or indirect fragments). This part is followed by a set of examples that can help us to get used to the editions of fragmentary texts and understand how to approach the information one can find in them. The final part is devoted to the fragmentary text itself - how it can be analysed and placed in a context. The author concludes this part with a reflection on the vestigial fragments and the problems of restoring the poems' mythical narrative with the use of later sources telling the same story (mostly Hellenistic compendia). He shows examples of later versions of the Trojan legends (Ptolemy the Quail, Philostratus, Pseudo-Hyginus), whose narratives are based on several earlier mythical accounts that can be iden-

² A. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge 1960.

tified to a certain point. He rightly observes that this issue, hotly debated at the outset of the XX century, is now understudied and could yield interesting results when approached with an updated methodology.

The final chapter ('Relationships between poems') concentrates on the interaction and influence the poems may have had on one another. The first part summarizes modern scholarship on the subject. It revolves mainly around the so-called 'Neoanalysis' (with the Memnon theory as an example of this method). Gainsford presents the trend from both the side of its defendants and its opponents. The issues of literary critique are also covered, though this section is less complete. The author refers to scholars concerned mostly with Homer's poems and their relation with the archaic poetry as a whole – those who claim either that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* stands out of the other poems or those who argue that the other poems form a 'system' with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Thus, the vast scholarship that does not belong to these two trends and shows the relationship between individual poems other than Homer's is ignored (such as the issue of the influence of Hesiod on the Homeric Hymns). The second part is on ancient transmission. Gainsford shows interestingly how centuries after their composition the boundaries between poems were modified by 'cropping' (joining two poems together) and 'slicing' (making two poems out of one) them. He gives a list of examples of both procedures and discusses the beginnings and endings of the archaic poems on the Trojan war.

The book closes with an appendix containing an index of the editions of intact and fragmentary poems.

I would recommend the *Early Greek Hexameter Poetry* to anyone first entering the field of archaic literature. Gainsford shows different aspects of archaic hexameter poems in an intelligent and interesting way, leading the reader through many controversial questions and summarizing the most up-to date scholarly trends. He is interested not only in the recent scholarly trends either as he deals with some issues that do not receive much attention nowadays (such as the Quellenkritik). It is worth noticing that the book does not only summarize the study of other scholars on the subject, but gives us two original and unique tools – the catalogue of all hexameter inscription and the list of examples of 'splicing' and 'cropping' the texts.

Especially useful are Gainsford's various methodological considerations. He treads very carefully when approaching ancient sources, thus making his readers aware of the limitations of our method in this field and beware us of an over-enthusiastic and careless approach to the archaic poems. Many of his methodological leads can be applied not only when studying the archaic poems, but in other fields of research too.

In my opinion, the book's most important shortcoming – especially given the public the author seems to address – is that the chapters usually lack recapitulation or conclusions. Thus, some interesting questions seem to float in the air. Thus, Gainsford shows for instance the various ways the archaic poetry, but he does not try to show his reader what are the consequences of the fact that the poetry was performed. But the biggest problem is that Gainsford does not give the same attention to all epic poems and some of them are not really covered in his book. Though he introduces the epic metrical inscriptions and the chresmologoi, he neglects them completely in the later chapters – we do not really learn how they were performed or if they form a genre with other epic poems or what is their relationship with them.

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