CHAPTER SEVEN

GENRE, FUNCTION, AND SETTING

Even a superficial perusal of the *Golden Verses* will make it clear that the poem is a kind of gnomic text, that is, a text consisting of a collection of ἀνῶμου and which generally speaking forms part of the wisdom tradition. However, it soon becomes clear that the poem intends to offer more than a loose collection of truisms; as we have seen in the previous chapter, the poem wants to inculcate a complete way of life that will eventually lead to immortality. We therefore need to consider more aspects of the poem’s genre and function than just its gnomic character. Two other aspects that will be discussed here are the *Golden Verses* as a possible ἔρως λόγος, and the psychagogic function of the poem.

1 Gnomic Literature

Before discussing the Greek gnomic literature of the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman periods, a few distinctions are in order. Gnomic literature is related to, and not always readily distinguishable from, a number of other genres, such as wisdom literature, didactic poetry, and gnomologia.1

The term ‘wisdom literature’ may be used for a macrogenre, but it is also often reserved for Ancient Near Eastern writings concerned with the art of living wisely.2 The best known examples of this genre would be the Old Testament texts Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, and the apocryphal texts Sirach and Wisdom of Solo-

---

1 Cf., e.g., P. W. van der Horst, *Pseudo-Phocylides*, 77: “The poem of Ps-Phoc. has been called a Wisdom-poem, a didactic poem, and a gnomology (i.e. a collection of sentences, a Spruchsammlung). All these categorizations are equally right and equally wrong. Ps-Phoc. belongs to all these genres, but cannot be identified with one of them.” Cf. also Klaus Berger, “Hellenistische Gattungen im Neuen Testament,” *ANRW* II.25.2 (1984) 1045–46.

2 In German scholarship, the term ‘Weisheitsdichtung’ is, however, also used for Greek material; cf., e.g., Karl Bielohlawek, *Hypotheke und Gnome: Untersuchungen über die griechische Weisheitsdichtung der vorhellenistischen Zeit* (Philologus Supplement 32/3; Leipzig: Dieterich, 1940).
mon. Of these, texts such as Proverbs and Sirach, representing proverbial rather than speculative wisdom, are quite similar in terms of form and content to Greek gnomic and gnomological literature.

Didactic poetry is written in hexameters and purports to instruct the reader in a single subject of a scientific or pseudo-scientific nature. Hesiod’s Works and Days (on agriculture) and Theogony, and Presocratic philosophical poems are early examples. Didactic poems were also popular in the Hellenistic and imperial periods; we find poems on such diverse topics as astronomy (Aratus and Manilius), agriculture (Virgil), philosophy (Lucretius), ars poetica (Horace), healing (Marcellus of Side), geography (Dionysius Periegetes), hunting and fishing (Oppian and Pseudo-Oppian), and poisons and poisonous animals (Nicander).

Gnomic literature also aims at instruction, but not in one area of knowledge: its subject is life itself; its purpose to teach men to face the problems and opportunities of every day life with equanimity and restraint; its method the inculcation of maxims and moral precepts. A gnomic writing therefore consists of γνώμαι (sententiae in Latin), which are brief sayings relating to everyday living, expressing either a true or a desired state of affairs. γνώμαι can thus be descriptive (maxims) or prescriptive (precepts), although even descriptive γνώμαι usually have ethical implications. Gnomic literature occurs in both verse and prose.

---


4 Effe, Dichtung und Lehre, discusses as many as twenty-nine authors. See also Michael von Albrecht, “Didaktische Poesie,” Kl. Pauly 2.4-5.

5 Cf. [Isocrates] Demonic. 12 (the introduction to the gnomic section, chaps. 13-43): “But it is not possible for the mind to be so disposed unless one is fraught with many noble maxims; for, as it is the nature of the body to be developed by appropriate exercises, it is the nature of the soul to be developed by moral precepts. Wherefore I shall endeavour to set before you concisely by what practices I think you can make the most progress toward virtue and win the highest repute in the eyes of all other men” (trans. George Norlin, LCL).

6 Cf. Aristotle Rh. 2.21.2: ἕστι δὲ γνώμη ἀποφάσεως, οὐ μὲντοι περὶ τῶν καθ’ ἐκαστόν, ... ἄλλα καθόλου καὶ οὐ περὶ πάντων καθόλου, ... ἄλλα περὶ δοσιν αἱ πράξεις εἰσὶ, καὶ οἰκετᾶ ἣ φευκτά ἕστι πρός το πράττειν ("Now, a maxim is a statement, not however concerning particulars, ... but general; it does not even deal with all general things, ... but with the objects of human actions, and with what should be chosen or avoided with reference to them"; trans. J. H. Freese, LCL); Auctor ad Herennium 4.17.24: Sententia est oratio sumpta de vita, quae aut quid sit aut quid esse oporteat in vita breviter ostendit ("A maxim is an abbreviated saying about life, which briefly indicates either what is or what ought to be"); Hermogenes Progymnasmata 4: γνώμη ἐστι λόγος κοφαλαίως ἐν ἀποφάσει καθολικῇ, ἀποτρέπον τι ἢ προτρέπον ἐκί τι, ἢ ὁποῖον ἐστὶν ἐκαστόν δηλῶν ("A maxim is a