CHARACTERIZATION IN HELLENISTIC EPIGRAM

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It might seem paradoxical to expect to find characterization in poems which have such a small compass as Hellenistic epigrams. Yet in certain sub-branches of the genre, especially in the early period, the very brevity of the format appears to have been felt as a challenge to authors to give the speaker as vividly characterized a persona as possible. There is no systematic treatment of this aspect of Hellenistic epigram, and the following essay attempts to open up a neglected field.

It is important that we understand precisely in what ways the Hellenistic period understood what we call characterization. Aristotle’s *Poetics* is particularly enlightening for the late-classical background to Hellenistic thinking. In Chapter Six Aristotle states that in the composition of tragedy the people involved in the action must have certain moral and intellectual characteristics for the audience to be able to judge their actions (49b36–50a7); the representation of character (ἦθος) reveals the moral choices made by the figures in the play, and the representation of intellect (διονοσία) denotes their ability to say what the situation involves and requires, or to make general statements relevant to the situation (50a38–50b12). Modern sensitivity demands that characterization include the emotional element, which Aristotle accommodates when he describes how the tragedian should represent character in Chapter Fifteen: a figure’s character (n.b. ἐπὶ τῶν ἥθων) may be lifelike and contain negative traits like proneness to anger, laziness and so forth, but should be portrayed as morally good (54b8–15). It should not be thought that since Aristotle calls plot the “soul” of tragedy at 50a38 he would necessarily give secondary importance to character in all genres of poetry: the pre-eminence he gives to plot in tragedy is conditioned by his tenet that tragedy is primarily a representation of an action (49b24), and that a plot is conceivable in tragedy without character (50a23–9, 50a39–50b3). Elsewhere, he enthusiastically applauds Homer for the way he introduces the people in his epics by letting them speak and act for themselves, so that they all are “full of character” (καὶ οὐδέν’ ἀὴθη ἀλλ’ ἐχοντα ἥθος, 60a5–11). Of course, he preceded the developments in epigram in the Hellenistic period, but
he would hardly have imposed his framework for tragedy on the genre, and would have allowed that epigram might indeed depict character as one of its prominent aims.

Clearly, then, the concept of characterization was well recognised in the literary criticism just preceding the Hellenistic age. A single word to denote the concept was longer in the making. An important development is the appearance of the word ἡθοποιία, in the first-century B.C., in the latter half of the period covered in this book. Strabo 14.1.41 tells us how a citizen of Magnesia, Cleombrotus, corrupted the melic style of poetry by imitating the dialects and ἡθοποιία of the cinaedi. This could mean something like characterization, or it might just refer to mannerisms popular among the cinaedi. More interesting is the passage in the On Poetry of Philodemus (col. ix 10–24) which reports the view of scholars who consider that the best poet is the one who is equally equipped in the construction of plot, in characterization (ταῖς ἀλλαξ ἡθοποιίας), and in diction. Philodemus admits that this view has some sense, but complains that it does not define what is a “best poet,” for a mime-writer, a historian or any other prose-writer could demonstrate the same abilities. Philodemus therefore makes it perfectly clear that Hellenistic critics used ἡθοποιία in the context of poetry, and that it meant something close to the modern reference of “characterization.” Philodemus’ interest in characterization is all the more interesting if we accept the identification with the epigrammatist of Philip’s Garland, one of the most vivid characterizers of all the later Hellenistic epigrammatists.

ἡθοποιία is in fact most frequently associated with rhetoric, where it refers to the speechwriter’s skill in creating for his client a persona which has, for example, moral worth (ἐπιεύξεια), for such a persona is most likely to inspire trust in his listeners. But, as we have seen, ἡθοποιία is not limited to the specific meaning ascribed to it by the rhetoricians. Indeed, by the Imperial period, the Greek rhetors define ἡθοποιία in very much the way in which we would talk of characterization. Hermogenes, for instance, calls it “the representation of a person’s

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1 For the context see Porter (1995: 120–3).
3 See below, n. 45.
4 Aristotle, Rhetoric 1.2.4; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Lysias 8, Isocrates 11. See in general Hagen (1966: 1–39), and Russell (1990) for a summary of the evidence and for examples of oratorical characterization.
5 Though e.g. Usher (1974: 33, n. 3) insists on the contrary.