

## Placing the Poet: The Topography of Authorship

*Nicholas Boterf*

Authorship by and large simplifies the complex process of poetic creation. The concept of authorship takes the inherently social process of creating a text and reduces it down to the genius of a single individual. This is most evident in theatre, where the collaborative and social process of writing, directing, and staging a play is attributed to the artistic creation of an individual playwright, whether Shakespeare or Sophocles.<sup>1</sup> This tension between the collective group and a singular authorial genius manifests itself more recently in cinematic auteur theory and its critiques.<sup>2</sup> But even in the case of non-collaborative arts, we have reasons for seeing forces at work that simply cannot be equated with the author. As Foucault and Barthes have reminded us, even if a work is penned in isolation by a single person, the work is still shot through and through with the ideological power structures of the society that the author inhabits.<sup>3</sup> An author's work in some sense belongs to this society just as much as it does to the writer. Even in the case of a single writer authorship often seems like a deliberate simplification, and maybe even misrepresentation, of the complex realities of artistic production.

This makes it all the more important to understand, when discussing archaic and classical concepts of authorship, what information is included and what is excluded. What is needed to make an author in ancient Greece? And just as important, what data is left out? This paper will focus on one of most fundamental, yet often ignored, aspects of authorship: the author's name itself. Though authors' names seem to be on the surface an arbitrary part of the poetic process (couldn't Shakespeare have written *Romeo and Juliet* under any other name?), postmodern scholarship has shown that an author's name has wider implications for concepts of authorship. As Michel Foucault has noted in his famous essay "What is an Author?" an author's name is never just a proper name. It functions as a means to classify, authenticate, and identify a text or a

---

1 For the creation of the author in Elizabethan drama, see Erne (2003) 56–77.

2 A good overview of the origins of auteur theory can be found in Gerstner (2003) 6–11. For an incisive, influential critique of auteur theory, see Kael (1963), esp. 18–20.

3 See Foucault (2001) [1969]; Barthes (1977).

tradition in a wide variety of discourses.<sup>4</sup> Authors' names are not neutral facts: they are created, and themselves create, a series of contexts for the reception and performance of an author's work. The way in which an author's name is presented, therefore, can provide us with important insights on ancient conceptions of authorship.

Before we proceed, my use of the terms "author" and "authorship" needs to be addressed. As has been noted by many scholars, the concept of "authorship" is a problematic one in the predominantly oral song culture of archaic and classical Greece.<sup>5</sup> I choose to use the word "author" here in order to emphasize the wide range of genres and texts mentioned in this discussion. Although my focus will be on poets, it is my contention that they are best analyzed using broader conceptions of authorship and authority in archaic and classical Greece.<sup>6</sup> I therefore use the term "author" in a very weak sense, meaning an individual to whom a text or series of texts is attributed. The poet in these cases is considered to be the creative force behind these texts, one whose presence validates the text and transforms it into a "work."<sup>7</sup> I want to emphasize, however, that this definition does not exclude *performance*, or for that matter, *reperformance*, as a means to authorship.<sup>8</sup> Theognis, after all, in the beginning of his famous *sphragis* poem claims some sort of ownership over his work and then goes on to immediately describe local reperformances of it throughout Greece.<sup>9</sup> It appears that performance and reperformance of oral texts are attributed to authors just as much as written texts.

---

4 See esp. Foucault (2001) [1969] 1626–1628.

5 One of the most influential treatments of authorship in archaic Greece can be found in Nagy (1990) 339–381; see also Ford (1985) for a perceptive analysis of the dynamics of authorship in the case of Theognis. For a recent comparison of authorship in ancient Greece and China, see Beecroft (2010), esp. 1–25.

6 As recent studies have emphasized, the historiographical "I" in prose was heavily influenced by both archaic epic and lyric poetry: for Hecataeus, see Bertelli (2001) 80–82; for Herodotus, see Marincola (2006).

7 In this regard the distinction Nehamas (1986) 686 draws between "authors" and "writers" is useful. As he argues, "Writers are actual individuals, firmly located in history, efficient causes of their texts ... Writers truly exist outside their texts. They have no interpretive authority over them ... An author, by contrast, is whoever can be understood to have produced a particular text as we interpret it. Authors are not individuals but characters manifested or exemplified, though not depicted or described, in texts. They are formal causes ... Their nature guides interpretation, and interpretation determines their nature."

8 For performances as a means to authorship, see Beecroft (2010) 17.

9 See ll. 19–24 West *IEG*<sup>2</sup>.