PART III

THE ORAL AND WRITTEN CONTROVERSY: PRIVILEGING LITERACY
THEOGNIS’ SPHRÉGIS: ARISTOCRATIC
SPEECH AND THE PARADOXES OF WRITING

Thomas Hubbard

The publication in 1985 of the ground-breaking volume *Theognis of Megara*, edited by Thomas Figueira and Gregory Nagy,¹ offered a wholesale paradigm-shift in the study of the Theognid corpus, transcending the long-stalemated debate between unitarians and analysts in much the same way that Milman Parry and Albert Lord’s seminal work on oral-formulaic composition transformed the comparable stalemate in Homeric studies some 50 years earlier. The essays in this volume, which emerged out of a NEH-sponsored seminar Nagy directed at Harvard in the summer of 1981, argue that the whole question of authorship is irrelevant, and that we should rather view the 1,400 odd lines of elegiac verse that has been preserved in manuscript form under the name of “Theognis” as a local tradition of aristocratic poetry at Megara that was unified in its political and social world-view, but not in terms of date or authorship. As such, its evolution can be likened to the accretive dynamics of the oral tradition that produced Homeric poetry, with similar consequences for the question of authorship and the instability of the text. While not directly addressing the question of oral vs. written transmission, this approach would seem to necessitate the oral status of Theognid poetry, at least during its formative period.

I was at first very captivated by the advantages of this point of view, and for a number of years taught it as the current orthodoxy in my courses on Greek lyric poetry. However, I have more recently come to have my doubts. In particular, the *sphrēgis* elegy, variously identified as 19–26, 19–30, or 19–38, seems to me an insurmountable obstacle, in that it rather clearly identifies a specific individual as author of a fixed and written text:

Κύρνε, σοφιζομένῳ μὲν ἐμοὶ σφρηγίς ἐπικείσθω
toίδ’ ἐπειν—λήσει δ’ οὗποτε ὑλεπτόμενα,
oὐδὲ τις ἀλλὰ κάσιον τοῦθελοι παρεόντος,
οὔτε δὲ πάς τις ἔρει Θεύγνιδος ἐστιν ἐπη

¹ Figueira and Nagy 1985.