LONG DIPHTHONGS AND HIATUS
IN EARLY GREEK EPIC
Phonology and the role of formulaic diction

BY
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1.0 Introduction

The present paper is concerned with one of the aspects of the synhaphea (‘phonetic continuity’) in the early Greek hexameter, viz. diphthongs and long vowels in hiatus. Hiatus may be defined (see Lejeune 1972: 315-16) as the direct contact between a word final and initial vowel/diphthong (or between two vowels/diphthongs within the word) without the occurrence of synhaphea preserving phenomena, such as shortening, elision, crasis and aphaeresis. Hiatus is thus essentially a disruption of the synhaphea; as such it tends to be avoided in Greek poetry and cultivated prose.

It follows from the above definition of hiatus that, in the case of hexameter poetry, hiatus after diphthongs and long vowels has to be distinguished from epic correption. Correption, the metrical shortening of a diphthong or long vowel in word final position before an initial vowel, belongs to the synhaphea preserving devices. As such it is a consequence of hiatus, rather than a case of hiatus itself.

The distinction of hiatus from correption, and hence the exclusion of correption from discussion in the present paper, has a metrical consequence. We will be dealing with diphthongs and long vowels in the arsis, rather than in the thesis of the dactylic foot.

1) I am indebted to prof. C. J. Ruijgh and prof. R. S. P. Beekes for useful comments and suggestions.
2) This usage of the terms ‘arsis’ and ‘thesis’ is modern (= post-classical). The meaning of the terms (‘raising’ and ‘lowering’) is applied to the voice of the poet, which is thought to be raised at the marked (‘accented’) part of the foot. Originally, however, (in ancient metrical theory) ἀρσις and θεσις were meant to apply to the (rhythmic) movement of the foot of a poet or dancer. Thus, originally the marked element (‘arsis’) was designated by ‘thesis’, the setting down of the foot; see Allen (1973: 100).
Hiatus after diphthongs and long vowels means in practice ‘hiatus after diphthongs and long vowels in arsis’. Hiatus after diphthongs and long vowels in the thesis of the foot, that is, the absence of correction, is a rare phenomenon, which has to be viewed in a wider perspective. The coincidence of spondaic words (or word ends) with foot end tends to be avoided in the Greek hexameter, with the exception of the first and (naturally) the last foot\(^3\). Thus, hiatus after diphthongs and long vowels involves word end after the arsis of the foot, in practice the positions 3, 5, 7 and 9 of the hexameter.

Correption will not be discussed for its own sake here. It has played, however, an important role in the history of the discussion of diphthongs and long vowels (henceforth: DLV) in hiatus. In the older literature\(^4\) DLV have been ordered by degree of increasing capacity to resist correction. Thus they were divided into heavy (high resistance) and light (low resistance)\(^5\). This purely phonological approach to hiatus and correption of DLV is inadequate. Resistance against correption of a DLV on account of its phonological character is an absurd notion, for resistance against correption (viz. hiatus after a DLV standing at the end of a spondaic word or a word ending on a spondee) virtually does not exist. As we shall see, ‘heaviness’ is proportionate to the frequency of hiatus after the DLV in arsis. Thus, the account of the authors mentioned (n.4) amounts to the conflation of arsis and thesis. This is unacceptable, for it is manifestly false to speak about correption when correption cannot possibly occur.

An entirely different approach is suggested in Athanassakis (1970). In his account the phonological differences between the various DLV are discarded. Athanassakis argues that phonology

\(^3\) Accordingly, hiatus after diphthongs and long vowels in thesis occurs most often in position 2 of the hexameter (thesis of the first foot), for example Λ 35 λυκοὶ, ἐν δὲ μέσοιαν ἐν μέλανος κυάνοιο. Hiatus in other thesis yields metrically flawed hexameters, e.g. Χ 199 ὡς δ’ ἐν ὑπερισκεύασθαι διώκειν (violation of Meyer’s First Law). See O’Neill (1942: 141), Beckes (1972), Janko (1982: 36-7), Van Raalte (1986: 93).

\(^4\) E.g. Hoffmann (1842-8), Monro (1891), Chantraine (1948).