CRITERIA IN THE GREEK LYRIC CONTESTS*

BY

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A. Introduction

In 1969 Bruno Gentili used the phrase "performance poetica" for a critical approach which, in the interpretation of archaic Greek lyric poetry, involves a thorough consideration of the oral communication of the lyric poem in a live performance before a specific audience on a particular occasion1). A considerable proportion of early Greek lyric poetry was produced in an atmosphere of rivalry, both informal (e.g. at symposia) and formal (e.g. at regional or pan-Hellenic games and festivals)2). Competition implies critical judgement and the application of criteria in the process of evaluation. In this paper we shall examine some of the value-judgements passed in the context of the Greek lyric contests or γόνες μουσικών, in an attempt to reconstruct a part of the "performance poetica" that operated in such circumstances3). The nature of the available

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2) Cf. J. S. Meier, RE I,1,840-866; S. Gzella, The Competition among the Greek Choral Poets, Eos 58 (1969/70), 19-32; Self-Publicity and Polemics in Greek Choral Lyrics, Eos 58 (1969/70), 171-179. On an unofficial level choices were made between poets, a process that implies critical standards and taste. Thus, for example, the tyrants of Sicily bought the services of the best poets to celebrate and record their achievements and virtues; cf. Plut. Moralia 1095d.

evidence (mostly later testimonia), its variable quality and its scarcity force the researcher of the subject on to thin ice. Nevertheless, even at the risk of ending up wet and cold, I feel it is a necessary and valid step, especially in the light of the development, in the last two decades, of the theory of literary reception).

B. Early poets

There is no sure evidence of 'official' lyric competitions before the 8th century B.C. Homer knew the ἀγών as an assembly, or as the place for, say, a contest of aristocratic (military, 'bouleutic' and athletic skills). In later sources, however, the ἀγών μουσακός appears in connection with the earliest surviving lyric poets. The oldest extant lyric fragment, two lines of Eumelus of Corinth, is preserved by Pausanias (IV 4,1) together with the comment that the Messenians first sent an offering and a male chorus to Apollo at Delphi during the reign of Phintas (mid-8th century B.C.); that Eumelus was the trainer of the prosodion; and that in ancient times the Messenians had a musical (i.e. poetry) competition. This suggests a form of contest already in existence by the time of Homer. For the late 8th and early 7th centuries there are clearer indications. We are told that Archilochus won a competition for a hymn to Demeter at Paros; and the Spartan Carneia, which offered lyric contests, dates from 676 B.C.  

5) Cf. RE I,1,836 and TGL s.v. ἀγών. J. D. Ellsworth, Agonios, Agonarchos, Agonisterion: Three Words allegedly formed from Agôn, 'Assembly', TAPhA 106 (1976), 101-111, and Agamemnon's Intentions, Ἀγών, and the Growth of an Error, Glotta 54 (1976), 228-235, has examined ἀγών and its derivations in post-Homeric contexts and concluded that there is no definite evidence for the meaning 'assembly' in such texts; in the 6th-5th century occurrences the word refers to games. On the literary ἂγών, cf. RE I,1,839-867 and Herington (note 1), Appendix I, 161-166 for a list of ἂγώνες μουσακόι. Homer did recognise the competitive spirit among Greeks: αὐτὴ ἄρσενει καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων (Il. 6,208).
6) For Archilochus' victory, cf. the schol. ad Aristoph. Aq. 1764; for the Carneia, cf. RE I,1,867-869. There is no clear evidence for the situation at Delphi, although it seems certain that the musical contests antedated the athletic contests introduced with the reorganisation of the games in 582; cf. RE I,1,854 and OCD