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# Women Poets and the Origin of the Greek Hexameter

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*A very considerable question has arisen, as to what was the origin of poetry. —Pliny the Elder, Natural History 7.57*

## i. a road trip with pausanias

Tennyson called the dactylic hexameter “the stateliest measure / ever moulded by the lips of man,” but he did not say whose lips first did the moulding. Despite much arguing we do not know for sure where it came from, or who developed it. But some ancient Greeks did, or thought they did. For them, the hexameter came with a personal history, a legendary one to be sure, but no less powerful for that. The legend, moreover, started with a woman poet. The trail that leads to this is a long and devious one, but a good guide presents himself, Pausanias, author of *A Greek Guidebook* (*Hellados Periegesis*). Although he is now valued primarily as a quarry cordoned off for topographers and archaeologists, he had a strong interest in poets, especially women ones. These include Sappho, of course, the valiant Telesilla of Argos of whom he tells two stories (2.20.8, and 2.35.2), and Praxilla of Sicyon (3.13.5). In his account of Boeotia he mentions another woman poet of the fifth century before our era, Corinna of Tanagra. She, he says (9.22.3f.), once defeated Pindar in a poetry contest, and was, he thinks, the most beautiful woman of her time, judging by a statue of her he had seen. He also speaks of

Myro of Byzantium (9.5.8). Pausanias was confident that she had written epic and elegiac verse.

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Pausanias chooses, moreover, to end his work with an enigmatic story about another woman poet, Anyte of Tegea. He had not mentioned her in his lengthy account of her home town in the mountains of Arcadia, but now her story seems to speak to him. It is set at a ruined shrine of Asclepius near the port town of Naupactus. The reason that Anyte had come there was a strange one: She had had, he says, a vision—not a dream, but a real vision—at the end of which she found herself holding a sealed tablet addressed to one Phalysius of Naupactus. He was, it turns out, a prosperous citizen of the town, but was going blind. Anyte made the journey, surely not an easy one, and delivered the tablet. As soon as Phalysius broke its seal, he found he could make out the letters—a wondrous improvement in his vision, which he attributed to the healing god Asclepius. That is why he built the shrine that Pausanias saw many years later. And the content of the message? Give Anyte two thousand gold staters. Phalysius did so. End of story. End of the *Guidebook*.

So, indeed, Pausanias paid attention to women poets, and there were plenty of them to pay attention to. There is good evidence of a vibrant tradition of women's poetry among the ancient Greeks. Pausanias is not the only writer of his time to note this. In fact, if on his journeys Pausanias had encountered the well-travelled rhetorician Tatian, the two near-contemporaries could have challenged one another to see who could name the largest number of women poets and identify the sculptors of statues honoring them. Tatian might have won, to judge from his *Address to the Greeks*, ch 33. But then, Tatian had an agenda. As a convert to a "barbarian" cult he wanted to show that his co-religionists had precedents for respecting women's intellects: "My object in referring to these women is, that you may not regard as something strange what you find among us, and that, comparing the statues which are before your eyes, you may not treat the women with scorn who among us pursue philosophy." So much for the Christian Tatian. Did Pausanias have an agenda, too? His stories of two women from Delphi, Boio and Phemonoe, help answer that question.

## ii. boio's disruptive poetry

when Pausanias's work describes Delphi, the plot thickens. In other settings the women poets whom he discusses are individuals greatly to be admired, beautiful, valiant, with knowledge, courage, or healing powers. In his account of Delphi, however, we see women in contention, sometimes acerbic, and with stories tied to arguments about the hexameter. A central figure is a woman poet named Boio, but she points to yet another woman poet, Phemonoe, the person Delphians claimed originated the hexameter.

First, Boio. She was, Pausanias says (10.5.7), a native of Delphi who at some unspecified date composed a hymn for the Delphians. Stories about her circulated at least as early as the third century BCE (Philochorus, *FGrHist* 328.F21), including one that she was the mother of the prolific poet Palaiphatos (Athenaeus 393e and *Suda Pi* 69). The stories may be legends, but poems circulated under her name, and while she was never mentioned in early Greek sources, in the Roman and Byzantine periods works attributed to her received considerable attention. Among them was one called *Ornithogonia*, or *The Birth of the Birds*. The learned German scholar Henseler in his article in the *Realencyklopaedie* (1890, cols. 633f.) thought this might have been a source for some of the stories of metamorphoses in Ovid and Antonius Liberalis. Perhaps he was right, but the title sounds like a parody of Hesiod's *Birth of the Gods*, the *Theogony*.

An iconoclastic disposition may also be detected when Pausanias (10.5.8) cites verses in which Boio alluded to the building of Apollo's shrine at Delphi:

Here in truth a mindful oracle was built

By the sons of the Hyperboreans, Pagasus and divine Agyieus.

Even though they were said to be from lands far to the north of Greece, it is not surprising to hear of Hyperboreans venerating Apollo. Herodotus (4.32–36) passed down a tradition concerning visits of Hyperboreans to the sacred island of Delos where Apollo was born. Boio, however, claims that Hyperboreans were the ones who actually built the temple of Apollo at Delphi. That claim ran counter to the version in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (line 296), where credit is given to Trophonius and his brother Agamedes.

Pausanias (10.5.13) accepts that tradition, but seems to enjoy Boio's challenge to it.

A hymn Boio composed for the Delphians challenged another venerable tradition. Pausanias (10.5.8) reported that at the end of this hymn Boio asserted:

And Olen, who became the first prophet (*prophatas*) of Phoebus, Was first as well to craft a song of ancient verses (*epea*).

It is clear that Boio has two targets in these verses, both components of Delphi's self presentation: first, that the prophets of Apollo at Delphi were always female, and second, that one of them was the first to use the hexameter. The most prevalent view, Pausanias says (10.5.7), is that "Phemonoe was the first prophetess of the god, and first sang in hexameter verse" (tr. W. H. S. Jones).

It is easy to dismiss all this as legend; sometimes, however, legends are more revealing than hard facts. That becomes clear, I believe, as we look at this Phemonoe.

### iii. phemonoe, the first pythia

when the Roman naturalist, Pliny the Elder wrote, "We are indebted to the Pythian oracle for the first heroic verse" (*Natural History* 7.57), he was affirming the tradition, also found in Pausanias, that Phemonoe, the first Pythia, was also the originator of hexameter verse. Strabo (9.3.5) and others accept that tradition as well. The name Phemonoe, moreover, was well known to writers of the Roman period. Pliny refers to her in several other passages. Lucan even used her name for the frenzied prophetess he depicted in book five of his *Civil War*.

In the late second or early third century CE, the learned Clement of Alexandria in his *Stromata* (i. pp.323, 334) asserts that Phemonoe chanted an oracle to the mythic king of Argos, Acrisius, the father of Danae, whom Zeus showered with gold. This makes Phemonoe's legend intersect with a popular ancient myth, but legend it surely is, nor can it be turned into history by correlating it with the archaeological record of Delphi. No ancient source tried to assign dates for—nor is the archaeological evidence at Delphi sufficient to provide a convincing date for—

the beginning of oracular activity there, as Scott (2014, p.48) points out.

Such antiquity did not, however, preclude claims to know the actual words of some of her verse. Again Pausanias is the source: in 10.6.7 he quotes three hexameters ascribed to her. They concern the story that Apollo on arriving at Delphi killed the serpent Pytho, who had at that time controlled it. Even at such an early stage, the lines imply, Phemonoe foresaw Apollo's slaughter of the serpent, ritual cleansing by skilled purifiers from Crete, and the everlasting fame that Apollo enjoyed as a result:

At close quarters a grievous arrow shall Apollo shoot  
 At the spoiler of Parnassus; and of his blood-guilt  
 The Cretan shall cleanse his (Apollo's) hands; but his renown (*kleos*)  
 shall never die

Phemonoe's story does not stop there. Indeed, stories about Phemonoe, though now often overlooked, in antiquity stood at the center of Delphi's self-presentation, its claims to preeminence or what we might call its ideology. One example of this can be seen in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (1. 40). There Phemonoe, not Thales or Chilon, is the author of the Delphic maxim "Know Thyself." Diogenes names the source of this story as Antisthenes of Rhodes (*FGrHist* 508.F3), a writer on whom he often relied, especially for information about philosophical "schools." In this case, however, Phemonoe is recognized probably because it was well known that Delphi claimed that its Pythia, not one of the Seven Sages (as in Pausanias 10.24.1), had enunciated the famous maxim. That claim was an important part of Delphic ideology and not lightly to be dismissed.

Among the ancient Greeks assertions about the "first discoverer" (*prôtos heurêtês*) of various crafts and practices are not uncommon, as Kleingünther showed many years ago. Sometimes these stories are simply reflections of local pride. The legend that Phemonoe was the first to compose hexameters was surely of this sort—an affirmation of the prestige of Delphi. There is, however, more to it than that, for if she broke new ground, there were followers in her footsteps, namely the long line of Pythias who gave some of their oracular responses in hexameters. Phemonoe established that tradition and we can now see what that tradition entailed. As early as 1961, Wallace McLeod showed that



hexameter oracles from Delphi were often formulaic, that is, they used the technique of oral composition that lies behind the Homeric epics and oral poetry, ancient and modern. This is a traditional craft, passed from one generation to another. Delphic stories about Phemonoe envision her as the founder of such a tradition, passed down from one Pythia to another.

Where does Homer fit into this picture? Certainly not as the originator of this meter. Did Delphi, then, claim that Phemonoe preceded Homer in the use of the hexameter? Certainly, just as the Homeric epics envision an oracle from the shrine of Pythian Apollo as part of the background to the Trojan War (*Odyssey* 8.79f.). Nowhere, to the best of my knowledge, does anyone in antiquity argue that Homer invented or was the first Greek to use this meter. On the contrary, in one tradition Homer gives thanks to Apollo, dedicating to Apollo at Delphi a silver dish (*phialê*) that he had received from the sons of Midas and on which he had inscribed:

Oh Lord Phoebus, Homer gave this fair gift for your thoughtfulness.  
May you constantly give me fame (*kleos*). *Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi*  
273f. It is as if this dedication hinted that Apollo, god of Delphi,  
had shared with Homer the craft that brought to him, as to the  
heroes of his poems, imperishable fame.

#### iv. sibyls and doves

since claims of discovery can confer prestige or preeminence, they can also provoke rivalry and contestation, and there was plenty of contestation about the hexameter. Socrates' contemporary, Critias, asserted that dactylic hexameter was invented by Orpheus (*DK* 88.B3). The philosopher Democritus ascribed that accomplishment to another legendary poet, Musaeus (*DK* 68.B16). Regional pride was likely involved in this dispute since the Musaeus legend was well grounded in Eleusis and its mysteries, while the Thracian Orpheus conferred on his Greek devotees blessings in this life and beyond. Yet, amid all this contestation neither Homer nor Hesiod was represented in antiquity as the originator of the hexameter. Women, however, argued over precisely that. At Delphi, as we have seen, Boio challenged conventional wisdom, but she was not alone. Pausanias encountered a tradition linked to an outcropping just down the



slope from Apollo's temple (no. 29 on the plan in Andronikos' guidebook [2001]). On that rock, the Delphians told him, "stood and chanted her oracles a woman by name Herophile and surnamed Sibyl." This woman, he says, was clearly born before the Trojan War, for she predicted that Helen would be a disaster for both Asia and Europe (Pausanias 10.12.1f.). Such a dating, legendary though it be, had the implication that Herophile chanted oracles at the site where later the sanctuary was established and Phemonoe prophesied. Pausanias goes on to quote four hexameter lines from another oracle attributed to this Herophile. On Delos he had learned of a hymn to Apollo that she had composed: "In her poem she called herself not only Herophile, but also Artemis, and the wedded wife of Apollo, sometimes saying that she is his daughter" (Pausanias 10.12.2).

Many sibyls, from many places around the Mediterranean are reported in ancient sources, most memorably the Cumaean Sibyl in book six of Vergil's *Aeneid*, and another Herophile who was said in the sixth century before our era to have composed three books of oracles in epic hexameters (Suda *Eta* 541) and sold them to the Romans. These were the famous Sibylline books to which Romans often turned for guidance.

Legends, forgeries, and pseudonymous texts abounded in antiquity, but one point is clear: the hexameter was regarded as the meter to use for inspired utterances, and while women had no monopoly on this medium, they were regarded as fully capable of using it, and other verse forms as well.

Pausanias has called our attention to eight women poets, historical and legendary: Anyte, Telesilla, Corinna, Myro of Byzantium, Praxilla of Sicyon, Boio, Phemonoe, and Herophile—not to mention Sappho. There is, however, one more addition to this cluster. Her name is Phaennis. Late in his description of Delphi (10.12.8f.) Pausanias digresses from his description of the site to write about another oracular shrine, that of Zeus at Dodona. Phaennis, he says, was a "Dove," (a Peleias) there in the third century BCE. Returning to his description of Delphi, Pausanias still has Phaennis in mind, quoting (10.15.2) her oracle predicting the defeat of the Gauls who invaded Greece in the third century BCE. These seven verses are not great poetry, but hexameters they are, and perfectly competent ones, too.

Who are these "Doves" of Dodona, to whom Pausanias

(10.12.10; also Strabo 7.7.12) refers? It is the title of a group of women whose oracles were often in hexameters. (much as “Pythia” was the title of the women who prophesied at Delphi. There was, however, rivalry between Dodona and Delphi, specifically over claims about the origin of the hexameter. Dodona claimed that an early “Dove,” also named Phaennis, “gave oracles under the inspiration of a god” (Pausanias 10.12.10). Of her and her fellow Doves, it was said “that they existed before Phemonoe, and were the first women to chant these two verses:

Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus shall be! Oh great Zeus!

Earth lets the harvest rise up, so proclaim (*kléizete*) Mother Earth. These verses are scarcely hexameters, but they are archaic-sounding enough to bolster the claim that before Phemonoe Dodona was already in business. And priority, as we have seen, could mean prestige and preeminence.

The competing tales about Phemonoe, Phaennis and others point to institutional, rather than purely individual claims of achievement. They thereby reflect the ideologies of some Greek oracular centers. They should not be shrugged off as irrelevant legends, for they have several important implications. First, the oracles attributed to these prophetesses are often in hexameters and need to be understood as poetry in a divine setting. They may not be great poetry, but if we recognize hymns (regularly in hexameters) as a poetic genre, then oracles deserve a similar recognition. With that comes improved understanding of the role of Greek women in the culture, for hexameter oracles, the largest body of ancient poetry by women, are part of what Lisa Maurizio (2017) has called “women’s culture of song,” but now we can, I am convinced, go further and recognize a culture shaped to a large extent by women singing and chanting, in work and religious settings, in joy and in mourning, and, surely, when prophesying. Second, through such verse Delphi, and perhaps Dodona as well, promulgated a connection between hexameter verse and inspiration. To that connection we now turn.

#### v. “inspiration” among the poet-philosophers

why all this contention over the hexameter? What was at stake? Delphic legends about the origin of the hexameter give one answer. They do not simply claim that at Delphi hexameters had

long been used for some prophecies. They implied that this verse form was from the outset linked to prophecy and had something divine about it, even when used in very different settings.

That understanding is accepted and reinforced at the outset of both Homeric epics: in the *Iliad*, “Chant about rage, Goddess”; and more elaborately in the *Odyssey*, “Of that man of many turnings, Muse, speak in me the *epos*” (*ennepe*, line 1); then in line 10 “of these things, Goddess, daughter of Zeus, speak (*eipe*) even to us.” The poet asks a divinity to tell these tales, as if he himself were their instrument. To be infused with a divine message seems very much like the way a Pythia speaks for, and *as*, Apollo. To call this *inspiration* may be the best we can do in English. The word builds on a recognition that breath, *spiritus* in Latin, *pneuma* in Greek, is a powerful metaphor for the permeability of the boundary between human and divine. No wonder then that Homer is sometimes called *theios*, *godly*, in later literature, extrapolating from his own terminology for poets and poetry (Sperduti 1950), or that busts of him and Hesiod were at some point placed in Apollo’s temple (Scott 2014, 311, n.21). They belong near that god and his Pythia.

Such marks of inspiration are also important for those who listen to these poems, especially so for today’s audience, for they demand that we re-examine the widespread assumption that “the stateliest measure / ever moulded by the lips of man,” is, in essence, a meter for long narrative poems, and so, when oracles or hymns occur in this meter, they are merely catching a ride on the lengthy, elegant coattails of epic. Phemonoe would know better than that, take Tennyson aside, explain that hexameter poetry originated at Delphi, and whisper into his ear, “First prophecy, then epic, not the other way around.”

Better, then, to approach the hexameter as the preferred meter for inspired utterances, whether short or long, narrative or oracular. Still, scale matters. Delphic verse oracles are usually quite brief. The two that the Pythia Aristonice gave to the Athenians before the battle of Salamis (Herodotus 7.140ff.) are relatively long as such oracles go, yet together they total only twenty-four lines, a sharp contrast to the twenty-four *books* of the *Iliad* and of the *Odyssey*.

That many hundredfold difference in scale makes possible a totalizing poetic environment, in which every object, every person

women poets and the origin of the greek hexameter and every action has a heightened status all its own, and usually an epithet to go with it. The result is the distinctive pleasure of the Homeric poems—not mere *hedone*, the tingling of nerve ends, but light-footed *terpsis* (e.g., *Odyssey* 1.421f.), or even soothing *enchantment*, *thelxis* (cf. *Odyssey* 1.347). The scale of epic narration allows one to relax in the flow of the story. It's like swimming with the tide, not at all like struggling in a whirlpool of prophecy.

Along with difference of scale comes difference of pace. Delphi's hexameter oracles can seem hurried, even frantic, as for example those ascribed to Aristonice in book seven of Herodotus. Oracles draw back, but ever so briefly, the veil that separates us from the future, offering just a glimpse of what is to come, while epic turns a multi-year past, decadeslong even, into steady narrative. The hurried pace of oracles is not surprising; after all, they concern life or death matters, ones that must be resolved in the immediate future. Epic, by contrast, takes its time, for it has the leisure to look back and savor a remote, imagined past, rather than to worry about an all-too-imminent future.

Still, for all the differences of scale and pace, in one respect oracular and epic poetry converge. Both were seen as inspired speech, and in such speech meaning is not always on the surface. Those who receive an oracle, even if it seems straightforward, must be alert to possible ambiguities and hidden implications. Among the Greeks inspiration is not the whole story, for it regularly requires interpretation. That also applies to epic. If listening to epic poetry is like swimming with the tide, one will still experience from time to time an interpretive tug, as if an undertow were pulling one below the surface to deeper levels of meaning.

One sign of the undertow is the tendency of epic to adopt speech patterns also used in oracles, such as riddles. That is the case in both Homeric epics from their very first lines. They challenge their listeners to ask themselves, "What is this 'rage,' (*mēnis*) that afflicts Achilles? What does it mean that Odysseus is a man 'of many turnings' (*polytropos*)?" Homer does not answer those questions. His audience, like recipients of an enigmatic oracle, must work this out for themselves as they move forward through the poem. The similarity of both oracles and epics to riddles is important, because riddles (*ainigmata* or *griphoi*) among the

Greeks are not kid stuff. They activate and strengthen a mature capacity to deal with ambiguity and complexity and to recognize metaphor, that is, as Christopher Benfey (2018) phrases it, “not just to *see*, but to *see-as*.” Riddles reward such alertness, and weed out those with a deaf ear for metaphor. Riddles and hexameters, moreover, gravitate toward one another, as we are reminded by the legend about another woman poet, Cleoboulina of Lindos (Diogenes Laertius 1.89), who won a reputation for composing riddles in hexameters.

Gender is also at play in both oracles and epics, but in different ways. The hexameter oracles of Phemonoe and her successors, did not need “All the charm of all the Muses,” as Tennyson phrased it, to get started. The female when inspired is filled with the presence of a male divinity. That seemed to go without saying. Nor did they often need to specify which male divinity was involved. At Dodona that was almost certainly Zeus. At Delphi it was the archetypal young male divinity, Apollo. Something similar may have been the case at the oracular site of Clarus, where Apollo also prevailed. Prophetesses seem rarely to have said anything about such experiences, but some male authors thought they knew the details. Aeschylus in the *Agamemnon* has the Trojan prophetess Cassandra speak to a chorus of sympathetic women of an overpowering closeness to Apollo: “he wrestled with me and he breathed delight” (1201, tr. Lattimore). Understanding female inspiration in sexual terms persists through the centuries, among both polytheists and Christians, notably Origen of Alexandria, writing around 248 CE:

It is said of the Pythia whose oracle seems to have been the most celebrated, that when she sat down at the mouth of the Castalian cave, the prophetic Spirit of Apollo entered her private parts; and when she was filled with it, she gave utterance to responses which are regarded with awe as divine truths.

—Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.3

When male poets turn to hexameters, however, they speak in significantly different terms about inspiration. They are explicit about their dependence on inspiration from a female. They often seem to know they need a female presence at the very inception of their work. Thus, in the opening verses of his *Works and Days* Hesiod invokes the help of female divinities:

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 Muses, who from Pieria give glory through singing,  
 Speak in me the tale of Zeus, your father, hymning his  
 praises . . .

—Hesiod, *Works and Days* 1ff.

Here Hesiod chooses the same verb, *ennepein*, as Homer used in the first line of the *Odyssey*. It is a difficult word to translate but surely points to something like inspiration; hence “infuse” as an approximation. Inspiration, however, depends on some feminine part of human consciousness—a concept still not fully understood, I believe, and never easily expressed, though personification helps. It provides, in effect, a human correlative to an otherwise baffling state of mind. For example, a female aspect of this state may be beyond male imagining, but we can imagine, though perhaps only dimly, encountering a Muse in some setting remote from the routines and conventions of day-to-day life, wandering with the shepherds perhaps, beyond the confines of the city. The opening of Hesiod’s *Theogony* turns such dim imagining into vivid narrative. There, Muses who dance on Mt. Helicon in Boeotia go about at night—in dream time, when the mind is receptive to truths forbidden by day. They are veiled in thick mist, hard to envision, but one can hear them, for they are singing hymns—hexameters, surely—to Zeus, Hera, and other divinities. Finally, their praise of Olympians gives way to praise of other gods, including “black Night and the sacred clan of the other divinities who live forever” (20f.). Who are these immortals, the ones we most need to meet and venerate? They are not named, but they address Hesiod:

You shepherds of the wilderness, poor fools, nothing but bellies, We  
 know how to say many false things that seem like true sayings, But we  
 know also how to speak the truth when we wish to.

—Hesiod, *Theogony* 26–28, tr. Lattimore

The words are riddle-like, almost oracular, demanding interpretation—leaving it to those who hear them to figure out which things in the poem are true and which are false. The underlying message, however, is clear: if you—whether poet or listener, Pythia or someone who consults her—want to understand such a poem, you must confront ambiguity and puzzlement.

Other Greek thinkers followed the same trail, laid out by Hesiod, and perhaps by prophetesses of even earlier date. Modern

scholars classify them as philosophers, as surely they are, but they are poets as well, and for a reason: hexameter verse and the invocations of female divinities signal that listeners must be on the alert. They will not be encountering a master who will set forth arguments and conclusions, to be accepted or rejected, more or less at face value. Inspiration demands interpretation. The listener must be prepared to plunge deep and form his or her own judgments. That's important for understanding poetry, no less so for thinking philosophically.

Among these philosopher-poets is the shadowy Epimenides of Crete. He produced, probably in the late seventh century BCE, a poem with the same title as Hesiod's *Theogony*. Legends about him abound (e.g., Pausanias 1.14.4) and his work was known and cited by Aristotle and others. Diogenes Laertius provided a brief biography. Quotations from his poems, though skimpy, are enough for us to hear the familiar hexameter cadence (*DK* 3.B11 and 19).

Parmenides of Elea, perhaps the most brilliant of all preSocratic philosophers and no mean poet himself, relived Hesiod's experience, not, however, as a rustic shepherd but as someone traveling from city to city by chariot, as a shaman or Holy Man might. Parmenides represents himself as escorted on his journey, however, by female divinities who draw back their veils, a bold *apokalypsis*, something conventionally allowed only at the moment of marriage, when the female ends her separation from the male. Here is the start of Parmenides' song, in a new verse translation by Richard McKim:

Horses! The mares of my chariot team once took me as far as my heart could aspire to go, transporting me over the road that leads to the goddess—yes, the road so often sung of that keeps the man of vision on the move from city to city. Sharp-witted and straining with all their might, those horses sped my chariot toward its goal, with maidens in procession as their guides. Its well-honed pair of wheels spun the axle, shrieking in its sockets as the sparks flew aside, while the daughters of the Sun forsook the halls of the house of darkness, hastening to escort me into light, where they seized their veils and stripped them from their faces.

—Parmenides, *DK* 28.B1, tr. McKim

Like Hesiod, Parmenides wants his audience to share what he has imaginatively experienced. But he does not define that



women poets and the origin of the greek hexameter experience for them. They need to interpret it for themselves. By his choice of the hexameter and his depiction of these female figures, Parmenides signals this expectation to his audience, in effect renewing a challenge posed by Hesiod in his *Theogony*—to distinguish true from false, or what *seems* true from what is really true. He envisions their response, it seems, not as the result of top-down communication, as the prose-philosophers of Miletus are assumed to have done, but as a challenge to his audience to interpret for themselves what he has to say. To be sure, he proclaims his inspiration, but inspiration, he well knows, demands interpretation. Listeners must make the poem their own. That can never have been easy, given the complexity of Parmenides' thought and imagery, but perhaps it was easier then than now, when all is expected to fit into the contours of expository prose and discursive reasoning.

Well into the fifth century before our era, Empedocles of Acragas also positioned himself within this tradition, invoking in hexameters his “ever-mindful, white-armed virgin Muse” (*DK* 31.B3). Her name, we learn, was Calliope (*DK* 31.F131). Positioning his work in this way does not mean that Empedocles was simply restating what he found in Hesiod, Parmenides and others before moving on to his own views. Rather, as Jean-Claude Picot phrases it, he is “in polemical dialog with Homer and Hesiod,” and very likely other poet-philosophers as well. Like them his statements are often enigmatic. While expressed with confidence, as if by revelation, we must not assume that they demanded uncritical acceptance. That is not the way Greek claims of inspiration work. Just the opposite: his oblique, often puzzling statements challenge the imagination, and demand thoughtful interpretation. For inspiration in all its varied forms among the Greeks was only rarely a one-way street, a pronouncement from on high, demanding assent. It was rather, as we have seen, a challenge to look beyond the obvious and to detect what the senses cannot always reveal.

Thinkers in early Greece, seen in this way, group themselves in two clusters. The divide is not between hard-nosed “philosophers” and foot-loose and fancy-free literati, but between, on the one side, prose writers such as the Milesian philosophers and their fellow countryman the geographerethnologist-historian Hecataeus, along with annalists, chronologists, astronomers and

other prose writers. These were mostly from Ionia. On the other side, were those who chose verse, especially the hexameter, to convey a vision of reality at the intersection of divine and human. This mode of thinking gives way during the fifth century to patterns more familiar to modern modes of thought. Eventually oracular pronouncements in riddles and hexameters fade as well, but in antiquity this mode of thought was never entirely forgotten, since texts embodying it retained a prominent place in education and the culture more generally.

vi. conclusion

we owe a debt to Pausanias, inexhaustible traveler, visitor of hard-to-reach places, lover of raging rivers and placid groves, connoisseur of shrines and statues, and admirer of women poets. To be sure, without him we might still make the acquaintance of some of these poets and of the preSocratic poet-philosophers. We would not, however, have heard much about Boio and Olen, Phaennis, and Phemonoe. Nor would we be aware of the ancient rivalries about the origin of the hexameter, and hence about the frame within which ancient Greeks saw this kind of poetry.

Some will dismiss as legend much of what we have seen, for legend it surely is. But how should we understand legend? It is surrounded by lively company, neighbored by myth and history, tugged in both directions. Yet, while great efforts have been expended recovering historical facts, and myth has been the center of brilliant interpretations, legends have often been allowed to wander off, and disappear into a sinkhole between their two more securely situated neighbors.

The legends about the Delphic origin of the hexameter need especially to be rescued from such neglect, for without them we would miss how this institution strove to be understood. Delphi wanted to be recognized as the birthplace of the hexameter. Its claims, whether historically true or not, remind those who hear this form of verse that it is not simply a vehicle for extended narrative, not a mode of embellishment or decoration, a high-class way of expressing what otherwise might seem routine or banal. Instead, as if standing in a place of prophecy, one experiences in such poetry the infectious, mind-controlling cadence of this meter, and with it a distinctive mode of speech—and of thought:

women poets and the origin of the greek hexameter associative, symbolic, intuitive, evocative, sometimes enigmatic, always challenging. In hexameter poetry we may at any moment find and experience a state that to some degree resembles the inspiration of the Pythias. Epic may invite its listener to relax and enjoy the stately pace of the unfolding story. But hexameters are a reminder that there may be more to it than that. One can never lay back feeling sure that all meaning is on the surface. What seems steady, straightforward storytelling can turn ambiguous, pose a riddle, hint at meanings below the surface. It demands a lot from its listeners, not just attentiveness but a special kind of seeing.

Are we, even in this reductionist age, capable of that kind of seeing? If so, we might think once more about the riddling ending of Pausanias's travelogue. Could it be that we are not entirely unlike Phalysius, who broke the seals on a tablet brought by a woman poet and found, to his surprise, that he had, after all, sufficient vision to read its message?

#### note

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