In my eyes he matches the gods, that man who
sits there facing you – any man whatever –
listening from closeby to the sweetness of your
voice as you talk, the
sweetness of your laughter: yes, that – I swear it –
sets the heart to shaking inside my breast, since
once I look at you for a moment, I can’t
speak any longer,
but my tongue breaks down, and then all at once a
subtle fire races inside my skin, my
eyes can’t see a thing and a whirring whistle
thrums at my hearing,
cold sweat covers me and a trembling takes
ahold of me all over: I’m greener than the
grass is and appear to myself to be little
short of dying.

But all must be endured, since even a poor [1]

This is Sappho’s fragment 31 V, in the translation by Jim Powell.¹ It has proved
to be an engrossing text to many readers, arresting in its physicality yet elusive
in its description of what is happening between the speaker, the addressee and
the man. A long list of later poets were prompted to write their own versions –
Catullus, Philip Sidney, Tennyson, William Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell,
Marguerite Yourcenar – to name just a few. Sappho 31 is a text that shows the
ability of Greek lyric to fascinate readers throughout the centuries.

Yet at the same time as exerting fascination, Greek lyric is sometimes
perceived as one of the less easily accessible areas of Greek literature. Greek

¹ Powell 2007, 11. The Greek text is uncertain in various places.
lyric has many points of contact with Homer, tragedy and other early Greek literature, but it also poses a distinct set of challenges. This introduction will discuss these challenges and the way in which they have shaped lyric scholarship. The aim is not to characterise Greek lyric as forbidding – its cultural influence across the centuries proves that in many respects it emphatically is not – but to help users of this volume understand some of the concepts and issues that dominate the study of Greek lyric today.

Greek lyric and its challenges

The meanings and history of ‘lyric’

One immediate obstacle in approaching Greek lyric is the ambiguity of the term itself. Classicists use ‘lyric’ in both a narrow and a comprehensive sense. The narrow sense excludes two major genres, elegy and iambos, while the comprehensive usage includes them. David A. Campbell’s Greek Lyric Loeb edition and G. O. Hutchinson’s Greek Lyric Poetry edition, for instance, contain only lyric in the narrow sense (elegy and iambos have separate Loeb volumes), while Campbell’s Greek Lyric Poetry commentary and M. L. West’s Greek Lyric translation cover also elegy and iambos, and scholarship in other languages shows similar variation.

This variation in the scope of the term ‘lyric’ today is a consequence of its changeful history. λυρικός, ‘lyric’, means literally ‘relating to the lyre’, and appears first in the second century BCE. The Hellenistic age was a period of intense scholarly work on the famous poets of the past. ‘Lyric’ arose in the context of this work, as a term to refer to one particular category of poets and poetry. It picks up on the frequent mention of the lyre in the lyric poems themselves.

Before λυρικός was coined the terminology was more loose. The most important term was μέλος (‘song’, ‘tune’), which is used by various early lyric poets to refer to their compositions, and Plato occasionally distinguishes ‘songs’ from other poetic forms, like epic and tragedy. μέλος continued in use also when λυρικός existed, and the adjective μελικός, literally ‘relating to μέλος’ and often rendered ‘melic’, is attested from the first century BCE. From then on, λυρικός and μέλος / μελικός existed side by side. λυρικός seems to have been associated in particular with early lyric poetry rather...
than contemporary work: it is standard in lists of the canonical lyric poets from the seventh to fifth centuries BCE. By contrast, μελικός and other μέλος-words often appear in timeless classifications of different kinds of poetry. But there was a good deal of overlap, and in many cases ‘lyric’ and ‘melic’ are used with little distinction. Eventually, Latin adopted both terms, as *lyricus* and (the less frequent) *melicus*, and Renaissance poetics created equivalents in modern languages. ‘Lyric’, then, is not a term known to the lyric poets themselves, but was coined with hindsight for what had previously been – and to a degree remained throughout antiquity – more loosely ‘songs’.

What is more, it is a term that changed its meaning over time. In Greek and Roman antiquity, both ‘lyric’ and ‘melic’ were used only in the narrow sense, distinct from elegy and iambos. Ancient scholars drew up separate canons of lyric and iambic poets, and in the rare cases that the word μέλος occurs in an elegiac and iambic (rather than a melic) poem it usually points to some other song rather than *this* song (e.g. Archil. 120 W, Thgn. 761). By contrast, elegiac poetry could be described with the same term as epic: ἔπη (‘words’, ‘statements’, e.g. Thgn. 22, Hdt. 5.113).

The narrow sense of lyric remained the norm also in the Renaissance, but gradually lyric began to occupy a place on a par with epic and drama and hence became more comprehensive. This broader sense became standard from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Goethe created the notion of ‘natural forms of poetry’, of which there are three: epic, lyric and drama. In the course of the nineteenth century, this triad entered classical scholarship and with it the comprehensive meaning of lyric.

Yet the narrow ancient sense was never completely forgotten, and so we are left with the ambiguous scope of lyric. One response to the ambiguity is to drop ‘lyric’ altogether and to use only *melos* and ‘melic’, which retained its ancient meaning with little ambiguity: elegy and iambos are hardly ever called melic. Another response is to specify explicitly how one uses ‘lyric’. This volume covers *melos* as well as elegy and iambos. ‘Lyric’ in the title is therefore to be understood in the broad sense, as an anachronistic but convenient term referring to all the poetry under discussion. Individual chapters use ‘lyric’ in different ways as suits their subject matter, but are careful to avoid ambiguity.

A second, less frequently discussed, kind of ambiguity in ‘Greek lyric’ concerns periods. Greek poets composed lyric pieces in the broad and narrow

---

5 On the use of λυρικός vs. μέλος / μελικός see Färber 1936, 7–16, with full documentation.
sense throughout antiquity. Mesomedes, for instance, wrote lyric in the second
and Synesius around the turn of the fifth century CE, and see ch. 16 for
Hellenistic lyric. Some lyric genres, in particular dithyrambs and paean, were
more or less popular throughout antiquity. ‘Greek lyric’ can refer to all such
pieces, and can also include Byzantine and modern Greek lyric. However, many
classicists restrict the term to the archaic and classical periods, with a cut-off
somewhere in the late fifth or the fourth century. In this they may consciously or
unconsciously be influenced by the ancient connections of ‘lyric’ with the canon
of archaic and classical poetry or indeed the canonical status of early lyric in
later periods. This volume follows the same convention: it is a companion to
early Greek lyric. The latest poet treated at length is Timotheus, who died in the
mid-fourth century BCE. It is hoped, however, that the chapters on reception
open out vistas on later kinds of lyric, both ancient and modern.

Many of the issues discussed so far – the retrospective coinage of the term
‘lyric’, its broad and narrow usage, the question of dates – concern ancient Greek
lyric more than modern or even Latin lyric, but they need to be seen in the
context of the complexity of lyric overall: ‘lyric’ is never a self-evident concept.
Scholarship on lyric of various modern periods stresses again and again that lyric
is difficult or impossible to define. A wealth of greatly different lyric theories have
been advanced through the centuries, based on metre, singability/readability,
brevity, density, subjectivity and much else. Most work now contents itself with
cataloguing different ways of approaching lyric, looks only for weak generic
coherence or speaks of lyric as a ‘mode’ rather than a ‘genre’.7 No literary form
can be satisfactorily described in timeless terms, but lyric is often singled out as
particularly difficult. As one critic puts it: ‘There is no theory of lyric or the lyrical
mode in the way that there is a theory of the dramatic and narrative mode.’8

There are several factors that make lyric hard to pin down in many periods.
One that is not to be underestimated takes us again back to ancient scholar-
ship. Lyric poetry is largely absent from the text that has shaped western
poetics more than any other: Aristotle’s Poetics. In this work, Aristotle takes
little interest in lyric as a whole (under whatever name) or in any of the lyric
genres. Even the dithyramb, which is mentioned at the beginning and several
times throughout, pales into insignificance when compared to tragedy and
epic.9 Both later ancient and Renaissance theorists experimented with various
ways of fitting lyric beyond the dithyramb into Aristotle’s schema, but the gap

1982. On lyric theories see further Silk, this vol., ch. 20.
9 Discussion of Aristotle on lyric: Genette 1977, 392–9; Walker 2000, 277–90 (who goes beyond
the Poetics); and Silk, this vol., 377 n. 17. On ancient lyric theories more broadly: Färber 1936;
Janko 1984, 128–33.
Introducing Greek lyric

could never be filled completely. It has been suggested that the foundation texts of eastern poetics, unlike their western counterpart Aristotle, focused on lyric rather than epic or drama and on the ‘affective-expressive’ dimension of literature rather than narrative and mimesis, and that this difference in choice affected later literary scholarship. While no doubt too sweeping, this claim contains an important kernel of truth as far as Aristotle is concerned. The staples of analysis that western poetics inherited from Aristotle, like ‘plot’ and ‘character’, are ill-suited for the many lyric pieces that do not tell stories, and may even stand in the way of developing appropriate conceptual tools for analysing lyric. Probably Aristotle’s lack of interest in lyric is at least as significant in its consequences for critics today as the Hellenistic creation of a lyric canon or the Romantic idea of lyric as one of three natural kinds.

A varied and ill-defined corpus

Next, the texts themselves. The first thing to notice about the corpus of Greek lyric is its striking variety, on the broad but also on the narrow understanding of the term. As an example of a poem that is rather different from Sappho 31, here is an extract from Simonides’ elegy commemorating the battle of Plataea in 479 BCE, in which the Greek forces commanded by the Spartan regent Pausanias son of Cleombrotus decisively defeated the Persians (Sim. fr. eleg. 11.20–34 W², trans. West).

... I
[now summon] thee, illustrious Muse, to my support,
[if thou hast any thought] for men who pray:
[fit out], as is thy wont, this [grat]eful song-array
[of mine], so that rem[embrance is preserved]

25
of those who held the line for Sparta and for Greece,
[that none should see] the day of slavery.
They kept their courage, and their fame rose heaven-high;
[their glory in] the world [will] never die.
[From the Eu]rotas and from [Sparta’s] town they [marched,]
accompanied by Zeus’ horsemaster sons,
[the Tyndarid] Heroes, and by Menelaus’ strength,
[those doughty] captains of [their fathers’ folk,
led forth by [great Cleom]broton’s most noble [son,]

30
... Pausanias.

---

10 A second influential classification schema, also focusing on the dithyramb rather than ‘lyric’, is Plato’s, Rep. 3.392c–98b. Cf. 3 n. 6 above.
The differences are numerous. Sappho sings about love and desire, while Simonides’ piece is about a battle. Both poets use the first person, but Simonides moves on from invoking the Muse to a third-person narrative, while Sa. 31 maintains a first-person perspective throughout. Sa. 31 is only seventeen lines long and many critics think we are missing only a further three lines. By contrast, we have parts of well over 100 lines of Simonides’ elegy, and many more lines may have been lost. Sa. 31 is composed in four-line stanzas, while Simonides uses elegiac couplets. Sappho composed on the island of Lesbos in the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE; Simonides composed this piece in the 470s for performance at a commemorative event in mainland Greece. Simonides’ elegy uses a broadly Ionic and Sappho a broadly Lesbian dialect.

Further examples would add to the sense of variety. Greek lyric varies in almost every respect: subject matter, purpose, length, metre, dialect, tone, geography, period, number and kind of performer(s), mode of performance and musical accompaniment, audience, venue (sanctuaries, streets, convivial settings, homes, etc.).

Because of this variety it is difficult to draw a clear line and say what is not lyric. Obviously, prose is excluded, and so is drama (except for the lyric odes contained within it, which are not covered in this companion). But what about philosophy? The Presocratics are usually treated as philosophy rather than lyric, and are studied separately. This division has its obvious purpose, but becomes questionable in cases like that of Xenophanes who wrote both ‘philosophy’ and ‘non-philosophy’ in elegiac verse. Or what about the Homeric Hymns? They are normally put alongside Homer’s epics, with which they share language and metre, but a case can be made also for looking at them together with hymns by lyric composers like Alcaeus or Anacreon. Or Hesiod’s Works and Days? This work too belongs to epic in form, but as poetry that gives advice on topics of traditional wisdom it also shares much with the elegiac poetry of Theognis and Phocylides. Even the Iliad and Odyssey do not inhabit an entirely separate world: especially elegy is close in both language and metre, and there is no reason why short chunks of Homer should not have been performed in the same format and by the same people as lyric pieces, especially at symposia.

Greek lyric in the broad sense, then, is both a varied and an ill-defined corpus. As a consequence, a good number of scholars abandon this notion and return as far as possible to ancient concepts. The limitations of Greek lyric in the broad sense as a critical concept are certainly not to be ignored. For many kinds of analysis, the more clearly defined units melos, elegy and iambos, or indeed sub-genres of melos like paean and dithyramb, are more appropriate (see further below, p. 10).

Yet it would be wrong to deny Greek lyric in the broad sense all usefulness. The corpus displays a number of tendencies that set it apart from other
literature of the same period, especially epic, and that bind together *melos*, elegy and iambos. (1) Most of the poems are short, certainly shorter than epic: Sa. 31 is more typical in its length than Simonides’ *Plataea* elegy, and even Simonides’ poem is shorter than the *Iliad*. (2) Often poems are anchored in the present, structured around a strong ‘I’ or ‘we’, and (3) are non-mythical in content: again Sa. 31 is typical, and again the *Plataea* elegy too has a stronger first person than epic. (4) Moreover, many lyric pieces do not just narrate but aim to achieve something: they pray, they exhort, they teach, they flirt and so on. Sa. 31 does so only in a weak way, but Simonides invokes the Muse and prays to her, and note the much clearer examples cited in ch. 4. (5) Like early epic, lyric is composed for performance, but unlike epic, it can point to its own performance, readily mentioning the dancers, singers or instruments that form part of its execution. ‘I now summon thee’ in the *Plataea* elegy is, again, only a weak example but see also the opening of Pind. *Ol*. 9 quoted on p. 253. (6) Finally, and this is related to all the other features, lyric poems often bear signs of being composed for a specific occasion or at least type of occasion. Like epic, lyric could be – and often was intended to be – performed more than once, but many poems are more context-specific than epic. Simonides commemorates one particular, recent battle, and scholars have speculated at some length about whether and how the unusual situation portrayed in Sa. 31 – a female singer distraught by watching intimate conversation between the female addressee and a man – reflects specific circumstances in which Sappho’s song was performed (as so often with Sappho, there is little agreement: see below).12

It is obvious that these tendencies do not amount to firm criteria for including or excluding poems from the corpus of early Greek lyric: neither Sa. 31 nor the *Plataea* elegy, nor indeed many other lyric pieces, can serve as examples of each of the tendencies listed in the previous paragraph. None the less, between them these tendencies create sufficient resemblance between the surviving poems to permit general statements about the corpus as a whole, and to distinguish the corpus from other kinds of texts, above all epic and drama. Such statements – like most statements about literary genres – have to allow for exceptions, but they still have descriptive force. Greek lyric in the broad sense is a concept that should neither be used as a firm category nor dismissed as meaningless.

*An incomplete record*

A major challenge of a different sort is posed by the incomplete survival of Greek lyric. Little is known of the early stages of the transmission of lyric, and

---

12 The often complex relationship between the lyric text and its real or imagined performance context is discussed by D’Alessio, this vol., 115–20.
we are mostly reduced to speculation.\textsuperscript{13} It is likely that some lyric pieces, especially towards the classical period, were composed with the help of writing, while others originated in purely oral composition. Similarly, in some cases written copies may already have been kept after the first performance, by the poets themselves, by performers, by teachers, by communities, by patrons and their families. On other occasions songs will have been handed down orally for a certain period before being recorded. The survival of certain pieces in different versions attributed to different poets (e.g. Mimn. 7 W – Thgn. 795–6; Alcaeus 249.6–9 V – the drinking song 891 PMG) suggests that certain kinds of lyric pieces could be adapted in the course of successive performances, probably both before and after they were recorded in writing. How widespread and how drastic such changes were and to what degree what we have today has gone through successive adaptations is difficult to tell. It seems unduly optimistic to take for granted that all our texts are transcripts of what was first performed, and unduly pessimistic to imagine the same degree of textual fluidity throughout as is generally assumed for the early stages of epic composition in performance.

A certain number of written texts were almost certainly in circulation in the fourth century, when lyric was quoted and discussed by many authors, sometimes in intricate and sophisticated ways (most famously, Plato, Prot. 339a–46d on Sim. 542 PMG). Especially in the Hellenistic period there was a systematic programme of gathering the texts of the canonical poets in reliable editions (see ch. 16). Only two such editions, that of Pindar’s epinikia and that of pieces preserved in the name of Theognis, were still copied in the Middle Ages and survive reasonably intact in manuscripts. For all other lyric we rely on papyrus finds (e.g. Simonides’ Plataea elegy), or on later authors quoting snippets of lyric in their own works, creating what is called ‘indirect’ transmission (e.g. Sa. 31, quoted by Pseudo-Longinus).

Overall, only a small proportion of the canonical songs edited by the Hellenistic scholars has come down to us, and just a vanishing fraction of songs composed altogether. What is left is often not representative. Pindar appears today as a composer of epinikian poetry, even though epinikia filled only four books of the seventeen-book Hellenistic edition. Mimnermus has become a poet of mostly small convivial pieces, even though he also composed a long elegy that was probably more similar to Simonides’ Plataea piece. What is left of popular song is probably only the tip of the iceberg, and of some genres, such as proems sung to the κιθάρα (a stringed instrument: see Battezzato, this vol., 144), we have only the vaguest understanding. Especially

\textsuperscript{13} On this controversial topic see Herington 1985, 45–7 and 201–6; Pöhlmann 1990, 18–23; Ford 2003.
songs that were only of local interest were lost early on. There is no doubt that the overall picture of Greek lyric that we have is skewed in a number of ways.

The fragmentary preservation of the majority of the surviving pieces adds further obstacles. The loss of the ending of Sa. 31 may have substantially changed the character of the song: the last line Pseudo-Longinus quotes suggests a turn from despair to endurance, but we do not know what came next. Simonides’ Plataea elegy is full of gaps, indicated in the text above by dots and parentheses containing guesses about what may be lost.

Perhaps the most distorting effect of the transmission history is the loss of music. A few cases of musical notation survive, but for the most part all we have is texts, and we find it hard to imagine what they may have sounded like in performance. The relative importance of text and music will have varied from piece to piece and performance to performance. Clearly, the text always mattered and in fact the rhythm was determined by the words rather than the music, but the extensive use of the word μέλος, ‘song’ (above, p. 2), shows that we are missing a crucial dimension. Music was central to Greek lyric, and there will have been some degree of continuity between lyric and what we would conceptualise as just instrumental music: the difficult term nomos seems to have been used both for texts set to music, such as Timotheus’ Persians, and for instrumental pieces such as the ‘Pythian nomos’ performed by just an aulos player.

Just as frustrating as the loss of the compositions themselves, text and music, is the loss of their performance contexts. In many cases it is possible to make reasonable guesses, but in others, including Sa. 31, we simply do not know. Should we imagine a setting with only Sappho and a few of her female companions (and who are they?) or a larger occasion (and what sort of occasion would that be?) We can make guesses, but the sheer number of different theories that have been advanced shows how little we have to go on. As the only female lyric poet to survive in substantial amounts, Sappho is a particularly difficult case (we have more information about the social institutions in which men participated), but fundamental uncertainty surrounds the performance of many Greek lyric pieces.

Next, our knowledge of the poets themselves is exiguous. Almost all our biographical material dates from after their lifetimes, and most of it from many centuries later. As a result, even some basic facts are debated. Corinna for instance may be archaic or Hellenistic (see p. 128, n. 58). Ibycus is variously argued to have lived in the first or second half of the sixth century (see p. 199 n. 25). Theognis seems to have become a name attached to a tradition of different poets composing anonymously (see pp. 174–75), and something similar has been suggested, though on less evidence, for other names.

Finally, our knowledge of the period of Greek lyric as a whole has severe limitations. Our earliest substantial written source for archaic history is
The Cambridge Companion to Greek Lyric

Herodotus in the second half of the fifth century, whose reliability is not always easy to assess. Material culture helps fill in many gaps but poses its own interpretative problems. As a result much detail of archaic history is debatable and the work on the social and political contexts especially of the earlier pieces has to allow for vagueness and uncertainty. The historical context which can help understand a lyric text is often as problematic as the text itself, creating the risk of circular argument. This potential circularity has a positive counterpart in the scope it creates for constructive interaction between text and context. Sometimes the lyric texts are most fruitfully regarded as one of several sources we have of early Greece, reinforcing, contradicting or reshaping what we know from elsewhere. Greek lyric can be a way into early Greek history as much as it can be illuminated by this history.

Scholarship on Greek lyric

The problems posed by the complexities surrounding ‘lyric’, the varied corpus and the incomplete record all shape current scholarship on Greek lyric and help explain its particular concerns and approaches.

Genres and categories

Ever since antiquity lyric scholarship has been characterised by attempts to subdivide the corpus of Greek lyric (in the narrow as well as the broad sense) so as to get a handle on this large but only weakly coherent collection of material. One approach has been to look for recognisable genres, like dithyramb, epinikion, enkomion, paean, elegy or iambos. Attempts to define and understand these genres and to trace their development have been a staple of lyric scholarship for a long time, and have gained new momentum in recent years, with several books devoted to individual genres. Sometimes such attempts are prompted by a somewhat arid desire for neat classification, but more often they arise from a genuine need to understand the form and purpose of a given set of songs or from the desire to analyse more coherent bodies of poems than that of lyric in either the broad or the narrow sense. Moreover, many of the genre terms go back to the lyric poets themselves. So whereas hiving off, say, revenge tragedies from the overall body of Greek tragedies is to introduce modern categories, the focus on these genres of lyric is an often immensely productive way of getting back to ancient, and in many cases archaic, Greek concepts (see further ch. 1).

A second, partly related way of getting a purchase on the varied corpus is to use polar opposites to divide up the material in various ways. When used with an awareness of their limitations, such dichotomies are powerful tools that are central to the study of lyric. The most important are as follows.