

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39570-0 - The Poet's Voice: Essays on Poetics and Greek Literature

Simon Goldhill

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'The project of this book', writes the author in his Preface, 'is to investigate how poetry and the figure of the poet are represented, discussed, contested within the poetry of ancient Greece.' Dr Goldhill seeks to discover how ancient authors broached the question: From what position does a poet speak? With what authority? With what debts to the past? With what involvement in the present? Through a series of interrelated essays on Homer, lyric poetry, Aristophanes, Theocritus and Apollonius of Rhodes key aspects in the history of poetics are discussed: tale-telling and the representation of man as the user of language; memorial and praise; parody, comedy and carnival; irony, masks and desire; the legacy of the past and the idea of influence. Detailed readings of major works of Greek literature show how richly rewarding and revealing this approach can be. The author makes liberal use of critical writings from areas of study other than Classics and focuses on problems central to contemporary critical debate. His book is uniquely placed to bring together modern and ancient poetics in a way that is enlightening for both. The work is written as much for the serious scholar of literary criticism as for the Classicist, and all Greek is translated.

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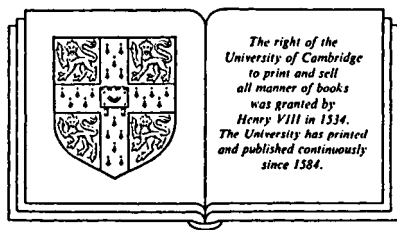
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THE POET'S VOICE
ESSAYS ON POETICS AND
GREEK LITERATURE

Simon Goldhill

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Preface

I do not want to simplify
Or: I would simplify

By naming the complexity

Adrienne Rich

The project of this book is to investigate how poetry and the figure of the poet are represented, discussed, contested within the poetry of ancient Greece. It is a vast subject and some markers of my procedure may prove helpful at the outset. There are three major strands of analysis that link the studies that follow. First, I set out to chart how the (self-) representation of the poet's voice implicates a wide series of questions about authority in language, access to knowledge, and the representation of humans in society. (For an adequate study of the poet's voice cannot be limited to describing the institutions of poetic production within a culture or to collecting the passages of ancient writing where poets are portrayed or the performance/writing of poetry is explicitly discussed.) Second, I explore how an awareness of other poets' poetry – an awareness displayed in parody, allusion, rewriting – is a fundamental dynamic of the construction of the poet's voice within a literary tradition. Third, my arguments return to the varied problems that arise from poetry's focus on its own workings – the self-reflexiveness inherent in such poetic self-representation. These three interrelated topics, which could be termed the problems of representation, intertextuality and self-reflexiveness, form an integral part of trying to discover the position from which the poet's voice speaks – and together connect the separate studies of this book.

The subtitle, however, *Essays on poetics and Greek literature*, has been chosen for two particular reasons. The first is to stress that this is not a history of Greek literature (nor even does it cover all the aspects of the problems I have just outlined). Each chapter takes a particular, delimited set of questions and a particular, delimited set of texts. Chapter 1 focuses on the relation between the hero as a teller of tales and the poet as a teller of tales in the *Odyssey* to discuss the representation of man as user of language. Chapter 2 puts together the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, some lyric fragments and Pindar's *epinikia* to consider the development of what is a

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crucial aspect of the ancient perception of the poet's role – praise, celebration, memorial. Chapter 3 turns to the public poetry of the fifth-century democracy of Athens and in particular to the comedy of Aristophanes to look at parody and the carnivalesque as foundations of the comic poet's voice. The fourth and fifth chapters turn to poetry from the Hellenistic archive: epigonal poetry, after the rise of the prose genres of history, philosophy, science. The fourth chapter selects some poems of Theocritus to investigate ideas of framing, multiplicity of voices and desire. And the fifth chapter treats Apollonius' sense of the (poetic) past in his epic narrative. There are, I am well aware, many gaps both in the roll-call of authors – little mention of Hesiod, Archilochus, Sappho, tragedians, Menander, Callimachus, for example – and in the range of texts of the authors who are discussed: in no case, not even Timocreon's, is an exhaustive treatment of a writer's extant corpus attempted. In part, this is because my express focus is on *specific* questions of *poetics* (not on producing a general overview of any poet's work). In part, it is because it seems to me crucial for such discussion of poetics to be focused closely on the texts of the ancient tradition: it is only in the detailed work of reading that these problems of poetics can be adequately formulated and analysed. Therefore, I have decided to concentrate on some poems of some authors for extensive and detailed analysis, rather than allowing each chapter to grow into a monograph, and rather than offering another collection of generalizations about (all of) Greek literature. My hope in structuring the book in this way is both that the different problems treated in each chapter prove mutually enlightening (as they are mutually implicative) and that the readings offered make up for such a restriction of range by what such a closer scrutiny can reveal about the poems and the poetics under discussion.

The second reason for my subtitle, and specifically for the phrasing 'poetics *and* Greek literature' rather than 'poetics *of* Greek literature', is to stress that this book stems in part from an involvement with contemporary work on literary theory. (Expressing my subject in the terms 'representation, intertextuality, self-reflexiveness' is – of course – already a marker of such involvement, a strategy of self-representation.) Each of my chapters makes liberal use of critical writings from areas of study other than Classics and focuses on problems central to contemporary critical debate. There is a double aim here, too. On the one hand, I turn to these contemporary critical debates for the illuminating insights that they offer into classical literature and the institutions of criticism. On the other hand, the essays in this book also regularly take a stand against what

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is all too often to be seen as a regrettable oversimplification of classical texts. The return to classical writing and culture is a gesture repeatedly made by contemporary critics in a remarkably wide variety of fields: I hope this book will enable that gesture to be made with a heightened awareness of the complexity and sophistication of ancient Greek texts (no one's childhood stories). *The poet's voice*, in short, is intended to contribute to a continuing dialogue between poetics and Greek literature.

I have made no attempt at the impossible task of an exhaustive bibliography over all the subjects and authors discussed. In the notes I have tried to strike a balance between user-friendly annotation and the necessary indication of my many debts to other scholars and of where further discussion may usefully be found. I have been persuaded, at the last gasp, by my publisher, to reduce the formerly comprehensive quotation of Greek to what is now a bare minimum; and, of course, all Greek is translated – in all cases with my own translations, though for Pindar based on the fine version of Nisetich – and where useful and relevant transliterated. Translations must be second best; but I understand that this is a necessary step if my aim of continuing a dialogue between Classics and other disciplines is to be achievable. Those who work on ancient Greek will be familiar with the arguments. And will probably have texts to hand anyway.

It is a pleasure to thank the many colleagues who have helped me in this project over many years. Helene Foley, Michael Silk, Paul Cartledge, Neil Hopkinson, Richard Hunter, Greg Nagy, Angus Bowie, Stephen Halliwell each read and commented on individual chapters. Parts of chapter 2 and chapter 3 were delivered to seminars in Oxford and benefited from discussion there. The readers for Cambridge University Press and the editor, Pauline Hire, offered detailed comments and general enthusiasm that have been crucial. John Henderson read, discussed, commented throughout the project: I find it pleasurable hard to imagine what working without such day to day critical and intellectual support would be like. Thanks.

Finally, my greatest pleasure is to be able to thank my wife Shoshana – with my love for her love, care, support – and to dedicate this book to our Daniel – for giving voice.

S.D.G.