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INTRODUCTION

1. CHORAL LYRIC POETRY AND ITS PUBLIC

‘Greek poetry differed profoundly from modern poetry in content, form, and methods of presentation. An essentially practical art, it was closely linked to the realities of social and political life, and to the actual behaviour of individuals within a community. It rendered the poet’s own experience as well as that of others, but was not private poetry in the modern sense. It drew regularly for its themes on myth, which was at once the sole subject matter of narrative and dramatic poetry and a constant point of paradigmatic reference in lyric.’¹ In the Greek world from the second millennium to the fourth century BCE, poetry was characterized by two essential features: it was sung, and it was transmitted orally. Poetry was sung from memory, not from written texts, and listened to, not read. Although systems of writing existed, they were not essential to the performance or to the reception of song; what role, if any, writing played in the composition of poetry in Homer’s time and in the subsequent three centuries, we cannot tell; it was, of course, vital for the preservation of the texts, without the music. The oral character of Greek poetry down to the ‘classical’ age is a fundamental feature of Greek culture.

To Homer, all poetry is ‘song’ (ᾠοιδή or μολπή). In the *Odyssey*, ᾠοιδή also means ‘singing’: to the epic bards, the song and the activity that creates it are the same; typically for the culture of ‘oral poetry’, the song only exists as it is being sung. Alkman and Archilochos (seventh century BCE) are the first to use μέλος to designate the ‘song’ as distinct from its performance. It seems that by this time only μέλη, i.e. poems in metres which we call ‘lyric’ (see below, pp. 14–17), were sung, while epic and iambic poetry was recited. The composers of *sung* poetry were called μελοποιοί or μελικοί (sc. ποιηταί). The term ‘lyric’, derived from ‘lyre’ (λύρα), is not found before the Hellenistic age; it is imprecise, since ‘lyric’ songs were sung not only to the lyre but to a variety of instruments, including the double oboe (αὐλοί).

‘Lyric’ poetry is performed either by a solo singer (‘monodic lyric’), or by a choir (‘choral lyric’). The distinction is determined by the function of

¹ Gentili, *Poetry and its public* 3.

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the song and the circumstances of its performance. In very general terms, monodic songs tend to be addressed to a restricted, private audience, or to one person, or to the poet's own self, whereas choral songs are aimed at a wider public, often the local community which has gathered either for a religious festival, or to celebrate an athletic or hippic victory of one of its citizens. While monodic songs often purport to convey the poet's own experiences, thoughts and feelings to persons close to him or her, choral songs give voice to the collective views, aspirations, and feelings of the community for which they have been composed. Many of them are cult songs, performed in honour of a god or hero as an expression of the community's veneration; the singers of a dithyramb or paean, whether in their home city or at Delphi or on Delos, sing as representatives of their city. This is true not only for songs composed for religious celebrations (εἰς θεούς), but also for those celebrating a fellow citizen (εἰς ἀνθρώπους). Such compositions, which included victory odes (ἐπινίκιοι or ἐπινικία), songs of praise (ἔγκωμια), or dirges (θρήνοι), are also addressed to a public audience in the sense that a success, for example, at one of the panhellenic festivals (which were, of course, also religious festivals) added to the pride and prestige of the whole city and was celebrated not only by the victor's family and friends but by the whole citizen body. This explains why Bacchylides' and Pindar's victory odes often combine praise of the victor with a mythical narrative linked to his city, or to the place of his victory. The victory thus appears as proof that the victor has shown himself worthy of the great deeds of his mythical ancestors. Bacchylides' ode 11 is a particularly clear illustration of the interrelation of the victor's praise and mythical narrative.

The intrinsically public character of the victory ode also explains why the poet's general statements (γνώμια), which normally provide transitions from one section of the ode to the next, are to be understood as general truths handed down from past generations to which everyone present can subscribe. In that respect, their function is comparable to that of the choruses in Handel's *Messiah* or Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*.

All choral lyric poetry, from Alkman to Pindar and B., is public and representative poetry, comparable in that respect to statues and other monuments dedicated in the sanctuaries of Delphi or Olympia, in the sense that they are public and representative art. Both poetry and art strive to create images that will be recognized by the citizens as ideal representations. In the sixth and early fifth centuries, the statue of an athlete is not an individual portrait but a young Athenian's or Aiginetan's ideal image that will

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immortalize his achievement (ἀρετή), enhancing his city's prestige (κῦδος); similarly, a dithyramb that narrates the exploits of its principal hero will be perceived as an image of the city's greatness.

The society on whose behalf statues and choral odes were commissioned was the educated and wealthy upper class of the aristocratic city states. Not only was their wealth based, as it had been in the feudal society reflected in Homer, on land ownership and agriculture, but it was created increasingly by overseas trade and the introduction of a monetary economy. As Gentili has argued, 'the new wealth favored the arts in general, painting and sculpture as well as poetry, though not so much for their own sake as out of a desire for prestige and power. For the rich nobleman or city aristocrat and, above all, for the tyrant, the artist's work was a means of increasing status and consolidating political position.'² If one of them commissioned a victory ode, the poet had to take his requirements into account in deciding what myth would be appropriate to the occasion and acceptable to his patron, and what would be the most successful way of presenting it – successful, that is, in terms of public appreciation by the community which his patron represented.

Cult songs, such as dithyrambs, hymns, or paeans, are different. They were commissioned not by individuals but by communities; Pindar's *Paeans* are addressed 'To the Delphians', 'To the Thebans' etc., which implies that these communities had commissioned them. However, the poet's situation was essentially the same; he had to consider what would appeal most to his audience. This was particularly important if the performance was part of a competition, as was the case with the dithyrambs performed at the Dionysiac festivals in Athens. It seems that the great festival of Apollo on Delos, the Δήλια or Ἀπολλώνια, also included a competition of choral poetry, as the end of B.17 suggests. Even though in Athens, at any rate, festivals had changed, after the constitutional reforms of Kleisthenes in 509 BCE,³ from occasions for celebrating a tyrant's greatness to occasions for celebrating the city's glory, and in that sense had become more inclusive and 'democratic', the dithyrambs and paeans of Pindar and Bacchylides remained 'elitist'; both poets composed for a well-educated, knowledgeable and discerning audience, and their choral songs were designed to appeal to quite sophisticated tastes.

² Gentili, *Poetry and its public* 115.

³ Cf. Hignett, *Athenian constitution* 124ff.

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After the middle of the fifth century, however, when most of the Greek city states became democracies, their societies also changed. The class of wealthy and ambitious noblemen, which had dominated the political and cultural life of Greece in the sixth and the early part of the fifth century and produced 'tyrants' like Polykrates of Samos, Peisistratos of Athens and Hieron of Syracuse, gradually lost its political power and cultural influence. Its demise meant that the traditional form of choral lyric poetry lost its patrons and its scope. The athletes who gained victories at Olympia or Delphi now came from different backgrounds; increasingly, the 'upper class' amateur was replaced by the professional champion who travelled from one festival to another, collecting prizes, rather like professional tennis players today. In Athens, the traditional dithyramb gave way to tragedy and comedy, which appealed to a wider public.

2. FESTIVALS AND GAMES

(a) *Festivals*

Everyday life in Greece was articulated by recurring festivals. These were the occasions when a community would come together to celebrate a god or hero with whom it had a particular link. The celebration often involved a procession (*πομπή*) and the presentation of an object, such as the *peplos* which was carried in the Panathenaic procession and presented to Athena on the Acropolis (see introd. to ode 15, p. 157), or of sheaves of wheat-stalks presented at the *Apollonia* on Delos (cf. Herodotos 4.33.1).

Dancing in groups and hymns sung by choruses are basic elements of Greek festivals, and taking an active part in them 'was part of community life, a way of learning a city-state's religious traditions and expressing one's devotion to the recognized gods.'⁴ The hymn is also, like the Panathenaic *peplos* or the Delian wheat-sheaf, a votive offering, intended to please the god or goddess and win his/her favour toward the chorus and the community. Walter Burkert describes its function in these terms: 'The hymn must always delight the god afresh at the festival; therefore for dance and hymn there must always be someone who makes it, the poet, *poietes*. The literary genre of choral lyric, which can be traced from the end of the seventh century, accordingly develops from the practice of the cult and culminates

⁴ Furley and Bremer, *Greek hymns* 1 21; see also Cartledge 1985.

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in the first half of the fifth century in the work of Pindar. The invocation of the gods, the enunciation of wishes and entreaties, is interwoven ever more artfully with mythical narratives and topical allusions to the festival and chorus. Already in the seventh century, several choruses are competing for the honour of performing the most beautiful hymn – with the costuming of the chorus then also playing its role. The religious function, the relationship with the gods, is in danger of being lost in the rivalry; but all are well convinced that the gods, like men, take a delighted interest in the contest.⁵

Paeans and dithyrombs are particular types of hymns. Traditionally, paeans are hymns addressed to Apollo, Artemis or Leto, while dithyrombs are hymns addressed to Dionysos. The earliest description of a paean being performed is in *Iliad* 1.472–4, where the young Achaeans, after the priest's prayer to Apollo for an end to the plague, 'propitiated the god all day long by singing a beautiful paean; they sang of the far-reacher, and he was pleased in his mind as he listened.' Three typical elements are evident here: (1) all the warriors are singing together as a chorus, (2) they are young (κοῦροι Ἀχαιῶν) and (3) they sing for the sake of protecting or saving their community.⁶ According to a recent survey of the genre,⁷ performing paeans had three main social functions: (1) articulating a sense of community among the members, (2) training for hoplite warfare, and (3) transmitting civic values from one generation to the next. Whether Bacchylides' Paean (frs. 4 + 22), composed for performance at the old sanctuary of Apollo Pythaeus at Asine in the Argolid, followed the traditional pattern, we cannot tell, as its beginning and end are lost. There is, however, a distinct possibility that the wonderful praise of peace (lines 61–80) was relevant to the circumstances of its performance: if the ten lines missing at the end contained another address to Apollo, it may have been a prayer for peace to be preserved or restored.

The dithyramb, first mentioned by Archilochos (fr. 120 W.) as a 'song of Dionysos', seems to have been given its definitive form towards the end of the sixth century, apparently by Lasos of Hermione.⁸ As far as its content is concerned, there is evidence to suggest that in the sixth century its main characteristic was an extended mythical narrative, for Ibykos is said to have told in a dithyramb how Helen fled into the temple of Aphrodite and from

⁵ Burkert, *Greek religion* 103.⁶ Cf. Furley & Bremer 190–1.⁷ Rutherford, *Paeans* 61–2.⁸ Cf. D'Angour 1997: 346–50.

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there spoke to Menelaos, whereupon he, conquered by love, threw away his sword (*PMG* 296). The mythical narrative is the main feature of the extant dithyrambs of Pindar and B., which all have titles indicating their subject matter. Such titles were an innovation of the sixth century, attributed to Arion (about 625–585 BCE) by Herodotos, who claimed that Arion was ‘the first of men whom we know to have composed the dithyramb and named it and produced it in Corinth’ (καὶ διθύραμβον πρῶτον ἀνθρώπων τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν ποιήσαντά τε καὶ ὀνομάσαντα καὶ διδάξαντα ἐν Κορίνθῳ, 1.23); the controversial term ὀνομάσαντα is interpreted by the *Suda* as ‘he named what the chorus sang’ (λέγεται . . . ὀνομάσαι τὸ αἰδόμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ χοροῦ).⁹ One of Simonides’ dithyrambs (*PMG* 539) had the title ‘Memnon’.¹⁰ In Pindar and B., some of the extant titles also name the community or city which had commissioned the dithyramb: [Κ]ῶν[α]ἰ[σ]ῶν[ος] ‘Ἡρακλέου[ς] ἢ Κέρβερος Θηβαίοις (Pindar, fr.70b), Ἴω Ἀθηναίοις (B. 19), Ἴδας Λακεδαιμονίοις (B. 20).

The most obvious difference between the dithyrambs of Pindar and B. is that Pindar’s, as far as we can tell from the extant fragments, refer to Dionysos and his cult, whereas those of B. do not – the only exception being B. 19 which gives a very brief genealogy of Dionysos at the end. One must, however, beware of generalizations, as none of the Pindaric dithyrambs survives complete and the number and extent of the fragments is quite limited. As for B., it is not clear why his dithyrambs omit the cletic invocations and other references to Dionysos and consist almost entirely of narrative or, in ode 18, of strophic dialogue. One might speculate that in the odes B. composed for Athens (15, 17, 18, 19)¹¹ he was following the example of Attic tragedy which had loosened its original connection with the cult of Dionysos and widened its scope to narrate myths that could help create an Athenian civic identity. Be that as it may, the difficulties which some Alexandrian scholars experienced in classifying these odes (see below on papyrus **B** in Section 8, and introd. to ode 17, p. 173) stem from their lack of distinguishing formal features. Ode 17, for instance, classified as a dithyramb, may in reality have been conceived as a paean, even though it

⁹ Cf. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb* 12; van der Weiden, *Dithyrambs* 2–3; Iranò, *Ditirambo* 189.

¹⁰ Cf. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb* 17; Iranò, *Ditirambo* 195.

¹¹ Whether 16, the ode with the closest affinity to Attic tragedy, was composed for Athens is uncertain; see p. 165.

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lacks the ritual refrain ἡ πρῶν. The disagreement between Kallimachos and Aristarchos (see p. 27) about the ‘Kassandra’ (see below, Section 8) shows that Aristarchos had identified mythical narrative as the defining feature of the dithyramb.

(b) Games

Athletic competitions are described in Homer. The funeral games in honour of Patroklos (*Iliad* 23.250–897) and the contests held by the Phaeacians to entertain their guest, Odysseus (*Odyssey* 8.109–233), have no direct connection with religious festivals, but seem to be inspired simply by the Greeks’ desire to compete for ‘first prize’, which is so tellingly summed up by Peleus’ advice to his son, Achilles: αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων (‘always to be the best and pre-eminent among all others’, *Iliad* 11.784). The oldest Greek hexameter inscription, thought to be contemporary with Homer,¹² sets out a prize for a dancing competition. Competitors not only hope to win, but want to be seen winning, so it was natural to hold these competitions at places and on occasions where a crowd of people would come together. In Greece, such occasions were primarily the numerous festivals in honour of gods or heroes, which attracted all kinds of contests: beauty-contests for girls, athletic contests for men and boys in different age-groups, musical contests for oboe- and kithara-players and singers, and in Athens stage-productions of dithyrambs, tragedies and comedies.

From the sixth century BCE, the four most prominent festivals became known as ‘Panhellenic’ festivals because they attracted visitors from all over the Greek world. They were the *Olympia*, held in honour of Zeus at Olympia in the north-western Peloponnese; the *Pythia* at Delphi in honour of Apollo; the *Isthmia* near Corinth, for Poseidon; and the *Nemeia* in honour of Zeus, held at Nemea, about half-way between Argos and Corinth. In Greek mythology, these games are also linked to funeral games honouring a local hero, such as Pelops or Oinomaos at Olympia, Archemoros at Nemea, or Palaimon on the Isthmus; the mythical origin of the Pythian games is traced back to the killing of the dragon, Python, by Apollo.¹³

¹² Athens, Nat. Mus. 192; *IG* I² 919; Jeffery, *Local scripts* 76 no.1 and pl.1; Immerwahr, *Attic script* p. 7 no.1 and pl.1,1.

¹³ W. Burkert, *Greek religion* 106.

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The *Olympia* and *Pythia* were held every four years (Greek chronology reckoned in ‘Olympiads’, i.e. the numbered four-year periods which were counted from the year when the *Olympia* were thought to have been founded, 776 BCE; the *Pythia* began in 582). The *Isthmia* and *Nemeia* were held every two years, from 582 and 573 respectively. At Olympia, the festival of Zeus lasted for five days, but the preparations took the best part of a year. The ten organizers and judges, called *Hellānodikai* (‘Judges of the Greeks’ – only ethnic Greeks were allowed to compete), were chosen by lot; during the last month before the festival, they supervised the competitors in a strict regime of training. After the swearing-in of the competitors and judges on the morning of the first day, the festival programme included the following events:¹⁴

Contests for heralds and trumpeters held near the stadium entrance. Boys’ running, wrestling, and boxing contests. Prayers and sacrifices in the Altis, including the official sacrifice of one hundred oxen at the altar of Zeus; consultation of oracles. Orations by well-known philosophers and recitals by poets and historians. Chariot- and horse-races in the hippodrome. Pentathlon (discus, javelin, jumping, running, and wrestling). Funeral rites in honour of the hero Pelops. Parade of victors and singing of victory odes. Foot-races and races in armour, wrestling, boxing, pankration (a combination of boxing and wrestling). On the last day, the victors were crowned with wreaths of wild olive by the *Hellānodikai* in the temple of Zeus.

The programme of the *Pythia* originally consisted of just one contest: the singing of a hymn to Apollo; after its reorganization in 582 BCE it included other musical contests: singing to the kithara, kithara-playing, and aulos(oboe)-playing. The athletics programme was similar to that of the *Olympia* (the chariot- and horse-races were held in the plain below Delphi, at Krisa). The prize was a crown of bay-leaves. The *Isthmia* and *Nemeia* also included musical and poetic competitions, athletics programmes similar to those of the *Olympia* and *Pythia*, and chariot- and horse-races. The prize was a crown of celery-leaves.

¹⁴ Adapted here from Swaddling, *Olympic Games* 37; see also Lee, *Olympic Games*.

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3. BACCHYLIDES' LIFE AND WORKS

Very little is known about B.'s life and dates. His home town was Iulis on the island of Keos off the south-eastern tip of Attica. His mother was a sister of the poet Simonides (557/6–468/7 BCE); even if she was up to ten years younger than her brother, she would have been unlikely to have had children after about 516. In fact, B. may have been born around 520, given that two of his poems, ode 17 and the *enkomion* for the young prince Alexandros, son of King Amyntas of Macedonia (fr. 20B), can be dated to the early 490s; this would make him closely contemporary with Pindar, who was born in 518. The assumption, made in some late Byzantine sources but not shared by the earlier biographies, that he was younger than Pindar is therefore unfounded, as is the entry in Eusebios' *Chronicle* for 431 BCE that B. 'became known' in that year, which may be based on confusion with a flute-player of that name (cf. Fatouros 1961: 147–9). B.'s latest securely dated victory ode (6) was composed for a boy's victory at the 82nd Olympic Games (452 BCE). Nothing is known of the poet's life after this date, which makes it seem likely that he died not much later.

When B. was born, his uncle, Simonides, already enjoyed a high reputation as a poet of dithyrambs and other choral songs as well as of epigrams. Peisistratos' son, Hipparchos, who ruled Athens between 527 and 514, invited Simonides to his court, as did Hieron of Syracuse half a century later. Simonides was also on friendly terms with aristocratic families in Thessaly. It is quite likely that B. benefitted from his uncle's many connections in his career, which seems to have taken off soon after 500 BCE with commissions from Athens for the great Delian festival (ode 17) and from Macedonia of a song for the young prince Alexandros, to be sung at a *symposion* (fr. 20B). In the 480s he competed with Pindar for commissions from the leading families of Aigina, and in 476 he celebrated Hieron's first success at the Olympic Games (ode 5), again in competition with Pindar, who composed his first *Olympian* for the same victory. In 470, when Hieron's chariot won the race at the Pythian Games in Delphi, B. sent a short victory ode (4), while Pindar composed his elaborate first *Pythian* for Hieron's victory celebration at Syracuse. B.'s most prestigious commission was the victory ode (3) for Hieron's success in the chariot race at Olympia in 468. B. also composed victory odes for athletes from Keos (1, 2, 6, 7, and 8), Phleious (9), Athens (10), Metapontion in Southern Italy (11), Aigina

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(12 and 13), and Thessaly (14), as well as an ode (14B) celebrating not a victorious athlete but a magistrate's election to office, possibly as hipparch, at Larisa in Thessaly; this ode may well have concluded the book of B.'s victory odes.¹⁵ As Pindar's poems were assembled and arranged in 17 books by Aristophanes of Byzantium (see p. 27 below), he may well have done the same for B.

Of the poems collected in the book of dithyrambs, odes 17, 18, and 19 were doubtless composed for Athens, probably also 15 and just possibly 16, while 20 was almost certainly performed at Sparta. B. also wrote hymns (frs. 1–3), paeans (one of which, frs. 4 + 22, contains a wonderful eulogy of peace), procession songs (frs. 11–13), maiden songs, dancing songs (*hyporchemata*, frs. 14–16), songs about love (*erotika*, frs. 17–19), and songs of praise or reproach for living persons (*enkomia*?, frs. 20–20F).

The only other event in the poet's life for which there is evidence outside his poems can be gleaned from a remark in Plutarch's *On exile* (14, 605C), who claims that the 'ancients' (παλαιοί) often created their best and most famous works while they were in exile, quoting, among others, B. who spent some time in exile in the Peloponnese. This seems credible in view of the fact that Pindar composed a paean for the Keans at the time when he was also writing his *Isthmian* 1. The Keans would presumably have commissioned the paean from B., had he been available: so he may have been in exile then. When this was is not known, because the date of Pindar's *I.* 1 and *Paeon* 4 cannot be established.

4. LANGUAGE AND PROSODY

(a) *Language*

Greek choral songs must have been sung in many cities and islands for many centuries before Homer (eighth century BCE), and long before they were first recorded in writing and transmitted under poets' names. The first Greek poets known to have composed choral songs of which fragments

¹⁵ Similarly, the book of Pindar's *Nemeans*, which was the last book of his victory odes in the Alexandrian edition, also has at the end three odes that have nothing to do with the *Nemeia*, the last one (*N.* 11) being an ode honouring a civic official (*prytanis*) upon taking office. The last three odes were appended to the last book of *epinikia* apparently because there was no other book into which they would have fitted better.