

Generative Poetics: Rethinking the Hesiodic Catalogue of Women as Narrative Device and Performance Strategy

The *Catalogue of Women*, often dismissed as a fragmentary genealogical register, has recently begun to be re-evaluated as a central text within the system of early Greek poetics. Far from a static or inert list, the *Catalogue* emerges as a dynamic poetic mode: open-ended, malleable, and responsive to the needs of performance. Its form inherently gestures toward multiplicity—names can be added, omitted, or rearranged depending on context—while its function highlights the creative and collaborative dimensions of archaic storytelling. This paper situates the *Catalogue* not as a secondary or marginal poem but as a generative mechanism that drives epic composition, one that explores kinship structures, courtship paradigms, and, through those, the very logic of heroic genealogy. By reading the *Catalogue* alongside Homeric catalogues and scenes of wooing and enumeration, I argue that catalogue-poetry serves as both a tool of narrative expansion and a reflection on the act of performance itself.

Odysseus' "catalogue of heroines" in *Odyssey* 11 offers a unique vantage point for understanding how catalogues function in performance. His narration to the Phaeacians suspends the momentum of his adventures in order to foreground his audience, using genealogical recitation as a rhetorical tour de force. By beginning with Tyro and Iphimedeia before turning to Epicaste, Phaedra, and finally his own mother Anticleia, Odysseus creates both genealogical authority and emotional intimacy, situating himself within the heroic continuum while simultaneously appealing to Queen Arete as a surrogate maternal figure. The catalogue thus becomes more than a genealogical exercise: it becomes a staging of heroic identity and a negotiation of audience response. Equally important is Odysseus' statement that he could continue "forever" enumerating women, acknowledging explicitly catalogue-poetry's

capaciousness. When Alcinous redirects the narrative from heroines to warriors, the catalogue shifts into alternative narrative pathways, underscoring its role as a flexible, generative device.

This performative openness is not unique to the *Odyssey*. The Iliadic tradition, too, reflects on catalogue-poetry as a site of collaborative poetics. The Trojan elders' dialogue with Helen in the *Teichoskopia* echoes the *Catalogue of Women's* preoccupation with wooing scenes, where genealogical inquiry and female mediation enable epic to revisit its own origins in the courtship of Helen and the oath of her suitors. Similarly, the second invocation to the Muses before the *Catalogue of Ships* foregrounds the limitations of individual memory and the need for collaborative poetic authority—mirroring Odysseus' own rhetorical gesture in the *Nekyia*. In both cases, catalogues reveal themselves not as closed records but as invitations to further storytelling, devices that open space for improvisation and audience participation. Catalogues operate within an ecology of archaic performance, functioning as “counterspaces” that allow epic to imagine alternate heroic beginnings. The *Catalogue of Women* in particular explores the exchange of women as the foundation of heroic genealogy, offering paradigms of wooing and marriage that both generate epic storylines and destabilize them. Read against Odysseus' catalogue and other Homeric moments of enumeration, the Hesiodic text emerges as a primary locus for reflecting on how epic generates and sustains its own plots—through lists that both constrain and proliferate narrative possibilities.

This paper thus reframes the *Catalogue of Women* not as ancillary to Homer but as integral to epic's poetics of possibility. Wooing scenes, lists of suitors, mothers, and wives, and the recursive gestures of enumeration all demonstrate that catalogue-poetry is less about preservation than about creation: it provides epic with its “accordion-like” elasticity, able to expand or contract depending on performance and occasion. Far from a sterile genealogy, the

Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* represents a poetic mechanism of potentiality, one that acknowledges the audience's role and sustains the cultural work of negotiating kinship and heroic legacy.

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