

Plato's *Dithyramboi* and Hellenistic Classification

The question of the generic classification of Greek lyric poetry is still a thorny subject, as it is often difficult to discern the criteria upon which the Alexandrian scholars classified lyric poems. The difficulty increases when we take into account how lyric poems of the sixth and fifth century were probably read and not performed in the Hellenistic period. By becoming texts and consequently losing their *Sitz im Leben* that defined their ritual and performative character, lyric poems also lost their generic definition. Thus, generic classification in the Alexandrian library was based either on markers of genre in the poems themselves (e.g. references to victories in order to classify a poem as an epinician), or on passages from earlier literature where song-types were discussed or commented upon and which potentially provided theories and criteria which the Hellenistic scholars could use as instructions.

For the purpose of this paper, I shall focus on the genre of the dithyramb. My aim will be to show how Plato becomes one of the main sources (if not the main source), which influences the Alexandrian view of the dithyrambic genre. Plato offers in his dialogues two definitions for the dithyrambic genre – a dithyramb is a poem for Dionysus (*Lg.*700a-b), but it can also be a poem that is predominantly characterised by narrative (*R.*394b8-c5). While the Dionysiac context of dithyrambs is recalled in a number of pre-Alexandrian sources (e.g. Archilochus fr.120 W; Pi. *Ol.*13.18-19; Pi. fr.70c.7, 16 M; Aesch. fr.355 *TrGF*), a number of poems with no Dionysiac associations were also classified as dithyrambs by the Alexandrians.

*P.Oxy.*2368, which will be central in my examination, is one of the most important pieces of evidence for discussing and understanding the criteria that the Hellenistic scholars used for the classification of lyric poetry, as well as for detecting the models and prescriptive comments on which these scholars based their definitions of the lyric genres in the Hellenistic

era. This much discussed papyrus preserves a commentary that records Aristarchus' disagreement with Callimachus about the generic definition and classification of a poem called *Kassandra*. The commentator mentions how Aristarchus considered the specific poem to be a dithyramb, whereas Callimachus classified it as a paean. D'Alessio argued that the commentary in *P.Oxy.2368* mentions two criteria for the poem's generic classification: the presence of an *epiphthegma* (refrain), either the *iē* refrain or one of its variations (ἐπίφθ]εγ{γ}μα κοινὸν ἐ-/σσι τοῦ δι]θυράμβου·, vv.18-19 after Lobel 1956, Galavotti 1957, Maehler 1970, Lloyd-Jones/Parsons 1983: fr.293; Ucciardello 1996-1997, Ieranò 1997), and the presence of a (presumably extended) narrative about *Kassandra* (vv.11-13 διὰ τὸ παρειλῆ-/φθαι ἐν α]ὐτῆι/ τὰ περὶ Κασ-/σάνδρας,]).

The paper will focus on this feature of the extended mythological narrative, which Aristarchus considered as one of the characteristics that defined the dithyrambic genre. The scholarly debate in *P.Oxy.2368* and the features of certain poems from Bacchylides' book of dithyrambs do suggest that Plato's views on the genre – the ritual and religious view of the dithyramb, as the song of Dionysus, on the one hand, and the formalistic view of the dithyramb, as a poem with long narrative sections on the other – were taken as prescriptive comments of the characteristics of the dithyrambic genre. In order to demonstrate how influential a role Plato had in generic definition and classification of lyric poetry, the discussion will also take into account other pre-Alexandrian sources that commented on song-types and seemed to have influenced the Alexandrians. Such an endeavour will conclusively show how Plato was the sole source to have given prescriptive instructions for the main characteristics of the dithyrambic genre.

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