

## Theognis' Seal Poems

In this paper I reexamine the question of poem division in the Theognidea. I show that an approach that looks for possible, rather than certain or even probable, poem divisions is more suited to the performance potential of the corpus in its original sympotic context. Using the “seal poem” as a case study, I challenge the notion that a careful reading of the text can discern “correct” poem divisions. I then explore the range of interpretive possibilities opened up by a more flexible approach to the boundaries of this “poem.”

Modern scholars are unanimously (if often implicitly) in agreement that there is a single correct way of dividing the Theognidea into discrete poems, but they often disagree about the location of their boundaries. The corpus, as transmitted in the earliest authoritative manuscripts, did not mark any divisions. Later manuscripts do, but disagree on their placement throughout, thereby suggesting that the practice lacks ancient authority. What ancient testimony we have further muddies the picture: “poems” of Theognis, as excerpted by Stobaios and other ancient anthologists, sometimes exhibit different boundaries than those which are generally received by modern scholars. Without reliable ancient guidance, we are forced to accept that “[t]he subdivision[s] can only be derived from the text itself” (Selle 2008, 158).

It is therefore up to editors to divide the corpus up into poems as they think best. Some have approached this task with admirable transparency. In his index of proposed poem divisions, Selle distinguishes between “Certain Separations” and “Probable Separations” (Selle 2008, 425-6). Even though his distinction highlights the uncertainty that inheres in the act of drawing poem divisions, it nevertheless still operates under the assumption that the corpus assembles poems of definite boundaries against which editorial choices may in principle be judged.

I propose to take Selle's approach a step further by looking for *possible* poem divisions and *possible* assemblages of non-sequential couplets. My approach re-envision the corpus as couplets that could be performed together or could be kept separate as sense and circumstance dictated, rather than as a series of discrete poems of definite extent. When we move beyond "certain" and "probable" to "possible" poem divisions and connections, we finally look at the corpus not as modern editors but as ancient symposiasts preparing for a party.

I illustrate the advantages of this approach by applying it to the so-called "seal poem." This section of the Theognidea offers an ideal case study because contemporary scholars have given it considerable attention (Bakker 2017; Bakker 2016; Hubbard 2007; Edmunds 1997; Pratt 1995; Friis Johansen 1991; Ford 1985). A key element of the resulting controversy has been where to draw the proper boundaries: Young (1971) stops at line 26, West (1989) at line 30, and Friis Johansen (1991) at 38. Rather than adjudicate their claims as right or wrong, I find all three choices valid and propose additional possible boundaries. I examine their respective performance potential, asking in each case how the lines might be understood if they were performed decontextualized from the "rest of the poem." I believe that this pluralistic approach resembles, and powerfully illuminates, the way in which a symposiast actually approached the material in the corpus.

#### Bibliography

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