

R. Scott GARNER, *Traditional Elegy: The Interplay of Meter, Tradition, and Context in Early Greek Poetry*, New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011 (American Classical Studies 56), X, 152 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-97572-3, £ 60.00.

Forty-two years ago Albrecht DIEHLE wrote: “Weil bisher keine anderen als statistische Möglichkeiten gefunden worden sind, die Charakteristika homerischen Formelgebrauchs zu bestimmen, ist es auch ausgeschlossen, auf dem von Parry gewiesenen Wege [...] die Bruchstücke des Archilochos als Reste oraler Dichtung zu erweisen. Derlei Versuche aber werden bis zum heutigen Tage immer wieder unternommen”¹. This *immer wieder* remains fittingly adequate also in 2012, after the publication of GARNER’s (hereafter G.) book. The author, indeed, argues that Archilochus was an oral poet, and extends this judgment to all Greek archaic elegists, saying that the production of elegy in the archaic epoch was an oral-formulaic process. He seeks to restate and significantly amplify theories propounded in the 1960s by Denys PAGE and James NOTOPOULOS², using PARRY’S and LORD’S paradigms in the field of Oral Theory as the point of reference for his investigation. On the basis of a complex of formulaic features detectable in the surviving output of such poets as Archilochus, Callinus, Tyrtaeus, Mimnermus, Xenophanes and others, G. finds elegiac poetry an important facet of the oral atlas of early Greek poetry and argues for treating it as a part of archaic cultural reference system based on the priorities of the oral mode of composition, communication and representation. In the course of his explanation of methodology, G. acknowledges the impact of John Miles FOLEY’S seminal works devoted to the theory and practice of oral composition on his own way of re-searching issues. Although FOLEY is, quite naturally – one may say – the book’s honoree in respect of methodology, a responsible treatment of the views of other methodological models would also be a welcome feature of the book (to the uneven way of consulting previous writing and thinking on the subject, offered throughout the book, I return below).

The author promises, on the basis of the formulaic examination of extant elegiac pieces, to open up new vistas on the nature of early Greek elegy. One may ask, whether he has fulfilled the promise. The answer encounters difficulties and depends on (1) the confidence level one is prone to accept for quantitative arguments on which the book’s central claims rest, and (2) determining whether G.’s understanding of the formula itself proves satisfactory. As to the first point, personally I am sympathetic to R.L. FOWLER’S opinion, expressed in 1987 (by the way, the neglect of his valuable book, *The Nature of Early Greek Lyric: Three Preliminary Studies*, Toronto–London 1987, by G. is hardly conceivable) that “not nearly enough poetry of [...] any early lyric poet survives to allow the detection of the formula-systems which are an essential part of oral improvisation” (p. 14), and not to G.’s conclusive statement that “statistics do indeed provide overwhelming justification for understanding early Greek elegy as heavily indebted to oral and traditional compositional techniques” (p. IX). Nevertheless, what G. offers the readers is, I am glad to say, interesting and stimulating. So FOWLER’S further uncompromising treatment of all search for lyric poets’ orality as wasted effort on that which “can never be proven” (*The Nature...*, p. 14), and, consequently, his

¹ A. DIEHL, *Homer-Probleme*, Opladen 1970, p. 49.

² D.A. PAGE, *Archilochus and the Oral Tradition*, in: *Archiloque*, Genève 1964 (Entretiens sur l’antiquité classique X), pp. 117–163; J.A. NOTOPOULOS, *Studies in Early Greek Oral Poetry*, HSCPh LXVIII 1964, pp. 1–77; IDEM, *Archilochus, the Aoidos*, TAPhA XCVII 1967, pp. 311–315.

provocative suggestion that such investigation “should be called to a halt before it has even begun” is entirely unconvincing.

As for the definition of formula, G. advances a separate definition of it, limited in scope, based on the concept of the group of phraseological integers, called by G. ‘lexical formulas’. The outstanding feature of a ‘lexical formula’ is the regular appearance of a group of two or more lexemes together, filling out a colon or cola by themselves or in conjunction with prepositive or postpositive words (see p. 21). G. is aware of the limitations of analysis created by such a definition (on p. 22 he says: “lexical formulas represent only a small subset of the possible phrases that a poet could produce, even within an entirely traditional compositional scenario”), but promotes the investigation of the process of ‘elegiac composing’ through the usage of lexical formulas as effective enough in revealing the existence of the oral elegiac verse-making. He agrees that HAINSWORTH’S concept of the ‘flexible formula’ might also be applied to elegiac poetry, but, unfortunately, postpones the possibility of – as he says (p. 22) – “more nuanced investigations into the flexibility of elegiac formulas” for some future date. This decision is not entirely convincing, the more so because HAINSWORTH’S theory serves the purpose of identifying what is ‘traditional’ in orality³, and the understanding of the oral traditional nature of early Greek elegy is the main purpose of G.’s volume (see p. 50).

The book deserves careful reading. The author’s discourse is very precise and concise, without even temporarily diverging from the main track, which provides a clear organization to the whole work.

In the first chapter, “Elegy and Its Traditional Possibilities” (pp. 3–17), after having briefly delineated the manner and places of performing elegiac pieces as well as the cultural context of early elegy, G. deals with the question of phraseological partitioning in elegy. He takes FRAENKEL’S colon system (together with the caesura system that helps define *cola*), modified by FOLEY, to exhibit the existence of phraseological structuring in elegy. The presentation of caesura employment percentages for early elegiac hexameters and within elegiac pentameters as well as the report of the punctuation distribution in elegiac pentameters leads G. to the conclusion that “early Greek elegy did indeed possess a metrical partitioning scheme that would have allowed for the possibility of employing formulaic phraseology” (p. 17).

Chapter 2, “Formulas in Early Greek Elegy” (pp. 19–38), brings a useful review of the scholarship on the concept of formula, but its core issue is to show the repeated occurrence of internal lexical formulas within the stichic hexameter, elegiac hexameter, and elegiac pentameter. The chapter must be read together with Appendix I (pp. 95–108), which lists 83 lexical formulas shared by these three types of lines. The examples collected in the chapter and in the appendix make clear, in G.’s opinion, that “the elegiac couplet had syntactical structuring proprieties that would allow it to share phraseology with epic in traditional ways” (p. 38), and that “the poets actually took advantage of such possibilities and employed formulaic phrases that could be adapted to fit either metrical context” (p. 38). G.’s exploration of the material is deep and interesting, but an objection against some supposed traditional formulas immediately emerges. G. does not take into consideration the phenomenon of the so-called ‘pseudo-formulae’, found e.g. in the *Theognidea*, and treats all verbal pattering recurring in the same position as true formulas belonging to a traditional oral repertoire. On the subject of such ‘pseudo-formulae’ FOWLER’S discussion (*The Nature...*, pp. 43–45) appears very instructive and convincing. So it would be desirable that G. takes a stance to his view.

³ See Mario CANTILENA’S right diagnosis, *Primato del significato o identità metrica? La formula come indizio di oralità* in: B. GENTILI, G. PAIONI (eds.), *Oralità. Cultura, letteratura, discorso*, Roma 1985, p. 287: “La formula di Parry serve a individuare l’oralità. Quella di Hainsworth serve a individuare la tradizionalità”.

Chapter 3, “Epic Correption or ‘Traditional’ Correption?” (pp. 39–77), centres its focus on the origin of the phenomenon of the shortening of a long vowel or diphthong at the end of the word before an initial vowel or diphthong in the following word, and on the function of this feature. Independently of whether G. has succeeded in showing that the correption is “a feature that demonstrates that the composers of archaic elegy were actively engaging with traditional processes rather than just mimicking them as a stylistic norm inherited from the past” (p. 39), his studies in the origins and nature of this metrical anomaly are one of the most valuable parts of the book. G. views the correption not as accidental or residual archaism, but as “a variation in metrical practice that worked hand in hand with traditional phraseology as a dynamic enabler of poetic flexibility within an oral-formulaic system” (p. 54). His analyses of the correption, aimed at showing its dynamic role in modifying traditional phraseology in Homer, are detailed, precise and persuasive. The results of the investigations are presented in the form of tables within the chapter and in six appendices (II: correption percentages by line position in the *Iliad*, III: correption percentages by line position in the *Odyssey*, IV: long-vowel correption percentages by line position in the *Iliad*, V: long-vowel correption percentages by line position in the *Odyssey*, VI: long-vowel epic correption categorization for Homer, including instances at boundaries between cola, coinciding with phrase contraction, and coinciding with shift in colon position, instances at intracolonic juncture points, and those not at inter- or intracolonic boundaries, VII: short-vowel epic correption in *Iliad* I and *Odyssey* I). What has been argued with great force by G. in this respect with reference to elegy, i.e. the similarity of the scenario for the use of correption in elegy and epic, suggesting the correption in both cases being an active enabler of oral formulaic phraseology, bases on statistics (presented again in tables within the chapter and in appendices, VIII: long-vowel epic correption in early elegy, and IX: short-vowel epic correption in early elegy) and involves the supposition that in all (also nowadays lost) archaic elegies the same tendency must have been present, which weakens the strength of G.’s argumentation.

G.’s judgments on the role of the correption as a device of oral compositional technique are supported in Appendix X (pp. 133–140), where correption frequencies in early Greek epic other than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are presented. The appendix ends with a passage dealing with the correption in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius, in which G. shows that Apollonius attempts to mirror the verse position of the early epic’s correption. The intention of this consideration is, of course, to stress the impact of the traditional oral model of composing poems in the archaic period on the purely literate poetic techniques in later times. The question of the extent of later poets’ mimetic attitude towards the oral means of composing poetry is a vast and difficult problem, demanding careful and detailed investigation. Such an Apollonian *Stichprobe* seems slightly unreasonable in a book totally focused on the archaic mechanisms of creating poems.

Chapter 4, “Further Considerations” (pp. 79–94), brings the recapitulation of the main results of G.’s investigations. The author also attempts to “indicate briefly a few of the productive areas in which research might build upon the paradigm shift suggested by the findings of earlier chapters” (p. 81). These are, in G.’s opinion, three, namely the questions of the evolution of Greek metre, the problem of traditional compositional methods in early poetry other than epic and elegy, and finally the consequences of elegiac formulaic compositional practices for creating meaningful messages by the early elegists.

The book is intended for readers who are not unfamiliar with the ‘polyphony’ of modern academic debates on the formulaic style and the possibilities of its operation in early Greek poetry. They surely will appreciate G.’s maintaining a synoptic control over the area of orality studies, but may find some of G.’s approaches to the subject of formulaic elements and their ‘elegiac implications’ troubling. Being a Foleyian, G. has the right to cause FOLEY’S contributions to be overrepresented in the book, but a number of bibliographical omissions he commits and the little attention received by some works of individual scholars in his book may suggest a limited familiarity with a body of scholarship outside the confines of ‘hard-line Foleyism’. I have already mentioned the neglect of Robert FOWLER’S book and his general reservations referring to the validity of research

oriented towards giving archaic lyric the status of oral poetry. It also seems upsetting not to find enough references to some modern leading figures in the study of orality in countries other than the United States and Britain: my key complaint in this respect is that G. failed to appreciate inspiring insights into the question of formulaic design of early Greek verses presented by Bruno GENTILI⁴, JOACHIM LATACZ and Edzard VISSER in their texts devoted to orality, and totally omitted their important scholarly texts on the subject⁵.

Although the oral composition of archaic elegiac poetry is its main focus, G.'s book deals with much else besides. It studies a number of general matters pertaining to various metrical characteristics of Greek poetry and offers some new explanation for the core questions, in particular the origin of the phenomenon of epic (or "traditional", as G. calls it) correption. All in all the individual analyses of several associated topics rather than the tantalising suggestions concerning the alleged oral character of archaic elegy appear, in my opinion, to be the greatest advantage of the book.

In sum, the conclusions drawn by G. are, in the light of the insufficiency of evidence, wholly unprovable, but there is no question about his book's overall merit.

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⁴ Although G. extensively quotes and positively estimates (p. 92) the passage concerning the gradual nature of literacy's permeation of Greek culture and the persistence of traditional forms from the English version of GENTILI's book *Poetry and Its Public in Ancient Greece*, transl. by A.Th. COLE, Baltimore 1988, he totally neglects his views on the origin of hexameter, B. GENTILI, P. GIANNINI, *Preistoria e formazione dell'esametro*, QUCC XXVI 1977, pp. 7–51.

⁵ I mean B. GENTILI, *Die pragmatischen Aspekte der archaischen griechischen Dichtung*, A&A XXXVI 1990, pp. 1–17; J. LATACZ (ed.), *Homer. Tradition und Neuerung*, Darmstadt 1979; IDEM, *Neuere Erkenntnisse zur epischen Versifikationstechnik*, SIFC X 1992, pp. 807–826 (= IDEM, *Erschließung der Antike. Kleine Schriften zur Literatur der Griechen und Römer*, Stuttgart 1994, pp. 235–255); E. VISSER, *Formulae or Single Words? Towards a New Theory on Homeric Verse-Making*, WJA XIV 1988, pp. 21–37 (= I.J.F. DE JONG [ed.], *Homer. Critical Assesments*, vol. 1, London–New York 1999, pp. 364–381). The latter is called by J. LATACZ, *Homers Ilias. Gesamtkommentar*, München–Leipzig 2000, p. 56, "ein wesentlicher Schritt über die [...] Beschränktheit der Parry'schen Zielsetzung hinaus".