

Ancient Greek Verse

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Ancient Greek poetry was an intricate part of the Greek culture. They used it everywhere to teach, entertain, compete, and relate information. The different types they invented were epic, lyric, elegiac, and dramatic. At first, they aimed their verse at encouraging their fellow men to greatness and heroism. After a time, they changed their opinion on human nature and even their state to become more vocal about life. The Greeks expressed themselves through this poetry and only wanted their audience to see the truth they did. Simonides said, "Truth is sovereign; but only to a few has God granted excellence that reaches its end."¹ In this paper, I will explore how Greek poetry evolved from epic into the varieties that are seen today and discuss the range of subjects the poets vocalized in their works.

The first written documents from the Greeks were poems, specifically the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.² Homer composed them at the end of the Dark Ages of Greece, around 800 BC. The *Iliad* narrates a part of the Trojan War, which has been placed around 1250 BC. It tells the tale of Achilles, a renowned warrior who almost lost the war for his people by refusing to fight after an ally insulted him. When he rejoins the battle, it turns in his favor and he eventually kills Hector, the leading warrior of the Troy. The *Odyssey* is the story of Odysseus, who insulted the sea god Neptune. In revenge, the god sends Odysseus on a journey around the known world through many dangers. Athena eventually saves him, and he returns home to reclaim his throne and wife from his enemies.

¹ Gentili, 5.

² Valiunas, Albis. "Learning From the Greeks." Commentary. 106 (1998): 48.

Homer's works were so significant that educators used them to teach the children.³ Memorization taught them how to read, religious doctrine, the qualities that heroes possess, and music.⁴ Homer is the first known to conceive *epic poetry*, the singing of the deeds of men in lengthy poems.⁵ It had a didactic purpose, to demonstrate *areté* (excellence in battle). Epics were full of allegories, which compared two different ideas, objects, or events.⁶ It contained flexible syntax, a vast vocabulary, short and long syllables, and invented new compounds and metaphors.⁷

The poets would most often present their works publicly, in situations such as competition, festivals, ceremonies, and symposiums⁸ (a gathering of philosophers who took the opportunity to get inebriated). They often used accompaniment, and some critics say that musical complement is utilized because Greek is a musical language. Alan Shaw counters that with the suggestion that their language sounds musical because their accent is based on pitch.⁹ Spoken poetry had three different types. Oral competition had poets reading and extemporizing works before their audience. During oral publication, only worthy and known poems were read. Oral transmission was used to cause memorization of the reading by the listeners.¹⁰

Musical instruments also accompanied *lyric* and *elegiac poetry*.¹¹ Clearly, lyric poetry used a stringed lyre for its music, yet it occasionally used an *augos*, another type of stringed instrument. It also had subgroups such as strophic¹² (performed by a chorus at the start of a play as it moved across the stage) and choral (proclamations on life and behavior with many

³ Rouillier, Christian. "Ancient Greek Poetry." Online. (2000): 1.

⁴ Gentili, 3.

⁵ Sikes, E. E. The Greek View of Poetry. (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company Publishers, 1931) 4.

⁶ Ibid., 198.

⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Shaw, Alan. "Some Questions on Greek Poetry and Music." Online (1997): 1.

¹⁰ Rouillier, 3.

¹¹ Bowra, C. M. Ancient Greek Literature. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) 14.

allusions).¹³ Lyric poetry was often without much set form. It flowed like a stream-of-consciousness piece of literature that did not acknowledge its listener.¹⁴ It had little pitch, harmony, or timbre, so if the performer would practice a pronounced rhythm, the act would lose force.¹⁵

Elegiac poetry is what modern critics now think of as funeral elegies. However, to begin with, this kind of verse was meant for military and convivial purposes.¹⁶ At that time, elegy was a reference to its meter, not its text. Varying dactylic hexameters (one long syllable followed by two short ones) with alternate pentameters (five syllables) formed the elegiac couplet.¹⁷ Tyrtaeus, in Sparta, used this type of poetry to encourage them in their endeavors. The flute accompanied elegiac verse. It developed into a lamentation as an old Peloponnesian custom.¹⁸ It progressed into elegies given at funerals, which are today often unaccompanied, and epitaphs because it had a great dignity of tone.¹⁹ Simonides (556-467 BC) was famed for the epitaphs he wrote along with poems on politics.²⁰

A fourth type of poetry is *dramatic poetry*. This arose from lyric and elegiac poetry. It is set on stage along with choral poetry. The first plays were simply poems. Like choral poetry, they served a religious function as they were performed first at festivals celebrating gods such as Dionysus.²¹ Sophocles, Aeschulus, and Euripides are examples of dramatic poets. The Greeks developed other types of plays, such as tragedy and comedic. The audience and critics judged works by the freshness and insight they brought to old stories. One Athenian poet said of their

¹² Rouilier 2.

¹³ Bowra, *Literature*, 53.

¹⁴ Blessington, Francis. "Is There a Lyric Center?" *Sewanee Review*. 57 (1999): 220.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁶ Bowra, C. M. *Early Greek Elegists*. (New York: Cooper Square Publishers Inc., 1969) 5.

¹⁷ Bowra, *Literature*, 48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ Gentili, 35.

²⁰ Bowra, *Literature*, 64.

²¹ Meyers, 1.

compositions, "We are ourselves poets of the finest drama in the world, for our state is an imitation of the finest life."²²

The Greeks felt that the gods inspired their art in order that an often-welcome divine madness touched the great poets.²³ It was the art of memorization combining natural ability with training in composition.²⁴ Greek poetry was performed in a variety of ways, with a range of musical instruments and for diverse intentions. Their ideas on how poetry ought to sound have also influenced modern thinking. As the ancient Greeks are the originators of the contemporary genres of verse, they contributed to its evolution from a memorized teaching tool to a deeper personal method of self-expression.

The objectives of early poetry were to honor heroic deeds and the gods, and to spread the Greeks ideals. To celebrate the beauty of men was called *paidiká*.²⁵ Epic and initial elegiac poetry aimed at praising men's achievements and took place at festivals and banquets.²⁶ Homer's pieces contained a multitude of heroes and their brave acts. He also inserted gods for inspiration (i.e. the Muses) and as characters one step above humans. Nevertheless, Homer had a hard time expressing abstract ideas or inner conflicts and solved character flaws through death or godly intervention.²⁷ Most poetry at this time was similar in that it did not explore emotional conflicts.

There were poets like Tytaeus, an Athenian in Sparta. He wrote on Sparta's life and laws. The Spartans marched to battle with the flute accompanying Tyrtaeus' poems.²⁸ He proclaimed

²² Sikes, 85.

²³ Meyers, Jeffrey. "The Greek idea of Disease, Madness, and Art." The World and I. 14 (1999): 319.

²⁴ Gentili, Bruno. Poetry and Its Public in Ancient Greece. Trans. A. Thomas Cole. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988) 5.

²⁵ Gentili, 113.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁷ Snell, Bruno. Poetry and Society: the Role of Poetry in Ancient Greece. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961) 10.

²⁸ Bowra, Elegists, 42-45.

that it was good for the young to die before they get old and useless.²⁹ Then again, poetry such as Hesiod's might have had more of an audience since he wrote for farmers instead of only the military. He wrote at generally the same time as Homer, 800-700 BC. Unlike Homer, we discover much about Hesiod and what he thought because he put down much of what he feels.³⁰ He speaks about folklore mostly, but amid these stories, he had practical advice for every season.

When we examine later Greek poetry, the purposes of the writings change. The Greeks became disenchanted with heroes and wanted instead a medium for self-expression.³¹ At this point, the idea that poetry needs to be composed in solitude developed.³² The ideas Greeks now wrote upon laid the foundations for modern thinking on the body and soul,³³ as wisdom became more important than heroism.³⁴ Meleager mourned aging as he says, "I wept for the youth and beauty I would see no more."³⁵ Xenophanes mocked the gods and was considered revolutionary.³⁶ Aristophanes was the earliest literary critic and analyzed morality;³⁷ he said men should live and love, not make war.³⁸ Theognis showed his ideas on the Greek government when he said, "Now, with our white sails lowered, we are adrift beyond the sea of Melos, in the dark night."³⁹

Other writers wrote about the pleasures of life and that the Greeks should live for gratification. Alcaeus, who lived on the island of Lesbos, was aggressive about obtaining what he wants. "These arms we must not permit to lie idle/ now that we are launched upon this

²⁹ Ibid., 53.

³⁰ Bowra, *Literature*, 48.

³¹ Snell, 97.

³² Ibid., 89.

³³ Ibid., 72.

³⁴ Ibid., 96.

³⁵ Gentili, 120.

³⁶ Bowra, *Elegists*, 121-135.

³⁷ Sikes, 43.

³⁸ Valiunas, 3.

³⁹ Gentili, 200.

enterprise," he said.⁴⁰ He agreed with Anacreon when he said *in vino veritas*, "in wine there is truth."⁴¹ Anacreon, 563-478 BC, was a poet of pleasure who recorded his thought on the positives of drinking.⁴² He also expressed this about love: "I am once again in love - not in love/ mad and not mad."⁴³

Mimnermus and Sappho were two more poets that composed love poetry. Mimnermus of Colophon wrote the first love poetry around 630 BC, as he agrees that only pleasure matters.⁴⁴ Sappho was the first well-known female poet of the Greeks. She lived on Lesbos at the same time as Alcaeus, but her verse was love poetry often understood to be written to her women friends. Sappho used perfect word choice to describe love and joy in friendship.⁴⁵

I would like to see the lovely way she walks
And the radiance that lights her face
More than the chariots and foot soldiery of the Lydians
Armed for battle.⁴⁶

She also had opinions on concepts like death. "Dead shall you lie and none shall remember you hereafter, for you had no share in the roses of Pieria."⁴⁷

While considering the effects of the Greek poetry, often-opposing viewpoints suddenly appear. Ancient thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle did not agree. Plato dislikes most poetry and poets.⁴⁸ Because Greeks made poets personally responsible for the morality in their works, they judged them on it. Plato said the poet was ignorant of what message he wrote, but he admitted that the meaning could still contain good.⁴⁹ He said they wrote on myths, which were

⁴⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁴¹ Snell, 33.

⁴² Bowra, *Literature*, 60.

⁴³ Gentili, 90.

⁴⁴ Bowra, *Literature*, 50.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 56-58.

⁴⁶ Gentili, 88.

⁴⁷ Gentili, 84.

⁴⁸ Gentili, 12.

⁴⁹ Sikes, 69.

uncertain stories and opinion.⁵⁰ Aristotle, on the other hand, studied the poems. He called them the art of evoking emotions and classified them by their form.⁵¹ He explained how poets deal with universals and human action.⁵²

From the Greek poems, modern critics have developed *philology*, the study of the origin and structure of a language. Greek is seen as a musical language, a speaking dance or *hyporcheme*.⁵³ The rhythm of their language came naturally from the way they spoke. Their music was pure melody, no harmony. The Greek poetry used stock lines and hexameter to make attention to the performance better and to cause the audience to remember more.⁵⁴

Greek poetry affected every part of their lives. They used it as a teaching tool in every subject. The different genres they invented were epic, lyric, elegiac, and dramatic. At first, they aimed their verse at encouraging their fellow men to greatness and heroism. After a time, they changed their opinion on human nature and even their state to become more vocal about life. Bowra says they began "seeing many things with unclouded eyes and unbiased by satiety or prepossession."⁵⁵ The Greeks expressed themselves through this poetry and only wanted their audience to see the truth they did. Simonides said, "Truth is sovereign; but only to a few has God granted excellence that reaches its end."⁵⁶ Their Muses touched those who saw the truth and had this excellence so that they produced works that have lasted and influenced many throughout the millennia.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁵¹ Ibid., 102.

⁵² Ibid., 93-95.

⁵³ Gentili, 24.

⁵⁴ Bowra, *Literature*, 27.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁶ Gentili, 5.

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