

Theognis' Unoriginal Didactic Failure

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Abstract Section 1 argues that Theognis embodies a robust conception of literary authorship and that his authorial unoriginality is inextricable from his moral authority. Section 2 interprets Theognis' failure to instruct Cynrus as integral to his didactic message and as part of a strategy whereby the poet's relationship to his addressee prefigures his relationship to larger audiences. An appendix provides a statistical analysis of the citation history of the *Theognidea* and argues that at some point after the classical period an original collection was supplanted by something like the strange text that we read today.

Keywords Theognis. Authorship. Didactic poetry. Elegy. Textual history.

Summary 1 The Poetics of Unoriginality. – 2 The Poetics of Failure.

Μούσαι καὶ Χάριτες, κοῦραι Διός, αἴ ποτε Κάδμου
ἐς γάμον ἔλθοῦσαι καλὸν ἀείσατ' ἔπος,
“ὅττι καλὸν φίλον ἐστὶ, τὸ δ' οὐ καλὸν οὐ φίλον ἐστὶ”
τοῦτ' ἔπος ἀθανάτων ἦλθε διὰ στομάτων.

O Muses and Charites, you daughters of Zeus, who came once to Cadmus' wedding and sang a beautiful saying: 'what is beautiful is dear, what is not beautiful is not dear'. That saying went through your immortal mouths.

These lines (15-18), wherever they come from, sit appropriately near the start of what we call the *Theognidea*.¹ Here, as elsewhere in early

1 I offer a paper about unoriginal didactic failure in tribute to an original scholar who has successfully taught so many so much. Translations of the *Theognidea* are based up-



Greek poetry, a divine performance provides an inset programmatic parallel for a framing whole.² The rest of the collection proceeds under the sign of the goddess' song.

Within a collection usually grounded in a more or less featureless here-and-now of enunciation, these lines hark back to one particular occasion long ago, the wedding of Cadmus and Harmonia, a moment of paradigmatic happiness (Pind. *Pyth.* 3.88-95) from a time when mortals mingled with and wed deities ([Hes.] fr. 1.6-7 M-W), long before the more recent moral and social decline lamented later in the collection (e.g. Thgn. 39-52, 183-192). The brevity with which this ancient episode is evoked at once depends upon and calls attention to its traditionality.

'What is beautiful is dear, what is not beautiful is not dear'. Even if we did not, as we do, have independent evidence that this was in fact a traditional saying, it would still carry an air of the proverbial.³ The Muses and the Charites once sang what we have already heard, or feel that we have already heard. If one now hears in their ancient song the origin of a contemporary commonplace, then every human iteration of that saying becomes a quotation of the divine.

'What is beautiful is dear, what is not beautiful is not dear'. The Muses guarantee the truth of these words, the Charites their beauty.⁴ The saying is itself beautiful (καλόν, 16) and so is, or should be, dear to us. van Groningen (1966, 17) writes that this piece "n'a pas grande valeur artistique" ('has no great artistic power'), but it cultivates a certain plain-spoken aesthetic. The goddesses' vocabulary is simple, as is their syntax, and this simplicity bespeaks truth.⁵ The Muses and Charities do not trade in riddles and paradoxes; divine didactic is here familiar and straightforward, even self-evident. 'What is beautiful is always dear' (ὅτι καλὸν φίλον αἰεὶ, 881 = 901) repeats the chorus of Euripides' *Bacchae*, perhaps echoing our passage, in an archaising song that recalls Theognidean themes and espouses

on Gerber 1999. Textual references follow West 1989-92 unless noted, and references to the *testimonia* follow Selle 2008a. I refer to divisions of the text as 'pieces'. I am not committed to the authenticity of these lines. For the history of the text see the Appendix below. I treat as the work of Theognis those pieces which either address Cyrnus/Polypaides or are quoted as Theognis' work by classical authors; other verse numbers from the collection are printed in italics. Much of what I have to say would be compatible with other approaches to the collection.

2 Spelman 2020. Friedländer 1913, 575 describes line 17 as "was man am ehesten als 'Motto' bezeichnen könnte"; cf. Pohlenz 1932, 414 ("Vorbild und Leitstern"); Biellohlew 1940, 30-1; Nagy 1985, 28.

3 'And perhaps, according to the ancient saying, the beautiful is dear' (καὶ κινδυνεύει κατὰ τὴν ἀρχαίαν παροιμίαν τὸ καλὸν φίλον εἶναι, Pl. *Lysis* 216c). Cf. Colesanti 2011, 51. For proverbiality see Morson 2011, 165 *et passim*.

4 Cf. Race 1990, 124.

5 Aesch. fr. 176 *TrGF*: ἀπλᾶ γὰρ ἐστὶ τῆς ἀληθείας ἔπη; Eur. *Phoen.* 469: ἀπλοῦς ὁ μῦθος τῆς ἀληθείας ἔφν.

a self-consciously traditional and ostensibly uncontroversial ethic.⁶

One might expect that, in this proemial setting, the Muses and Charites will be invoked and then duly imprecated. But this is not quite what we get. The syntax of line 15 echoes the ritualised language of prayer and thus all but guarantees that *Μοῦσαι καὶ Χάριτες* (15) are vocatives and not, as has been suggested, nominatives.⁷ The speaker addresses the goddesses of song, but he does not then ask them to provide him with song; instead, more strangely, he sings their words back to them. Scholars have hypothesised ways in which these lines could have belonged to larger rhetorical structures that are now lost, but the quatrain has its own epigrammatic completeness, as the transmission of our text presumes.⁸ The Muses and Charites standardly form choruses, but their words do not here sound like an excerpt from a choral song. Their saying neatly fills up a hexameter, but it does not sound like an epic extract.⁹ The goddesses utter two complementary statements which together assert, as the logicians say, a material equivalence: all and only those things which are beautiful are dear. In just one line the Muses and Charites offer a brief but complete guide to life.

And yet it is not clear precisely how one is supposed to use that guide. The goddesses equate two words of wide semantic range, as a glance at *LSJ*⁹ confirms. There was, and is, much disagreement about what is *kalon* and what is, or ought to be, *philon* (cf. Pl. *Euthphr.* 7b-d). Theognis himself instructs about such topics. The Platonic scholia assert that the saying 'the beautiful is dear' is applied 'to those who choose what is advantageous' (*παροίμια ἐπὶ τῶν τὸ συμφέρον αἰρουμένων*, Σ Pl. *Lysis* 216c; cf. Apostolius 16.87). This might be the sense intended in our passage, but why would someone ever knowingly choose something that was not, in some sense, advantageous?

The Muses and Charites' song represents a pure, absolutised didactic poetry, but latent in their words are some paradoxes of that genre. One might suppose that ethical didactic poetry tells us the truth and thereby helps us to do better at life. But this assumes that we don't already know the truth, and much early Greek didactic poetry, Theognis included, re-presents the familiar and traditional.¹⁰ Why

⁶ τῶν νόμων (Eur. *Bacch.* 891); νόμιμον (895); ἐν βροτοῖς (878 = 898), 'in the judgement of [all] men'. Cf. Eur. *Bacch.* 877-881 = 897-901 with Thgn. 337-40.

⁷ Cf. Norden 1913, 168-76; see further Friedländer 1969, 277-8; Jacoby 1961, 360-2; Kroll 1936, 32-3; Hasler 1959, 17-18; van Groningen 1966, 16.

⁸ ἔπος (16, 18) rings the quotation and marks it as a complete expression: cf. Lardinois 1997, 214 fn. 5.

⁹ "Probably from Hesiod" writes Dodds (1960, 187), picking up on the air of quotationality and reviving an old theory but positing a form of quotation unparalleled in the collection (cf. Simon. 19 *IEG*²).

¹⁰ Carey (1999, 29): "didacticism in Greek poetry is not necessarily to be understood [...] as the presentation of new knowledge; it is more often to be found in the (re)pres-

should one get commonplaces from poetry in particular? If didactic poetry does tell us the truth, how are we to know that it is the truth? And why should we assume that hearing the truth will help us to do better at life? This essay suggests that Theognis' poetry was interested in such questions.

1 The Poetics of Unoriginality

In a much-cited contribution, Ford (1985, 84-5) argues against the interpretation of Theognis' 'Seal' "as a proclamation of authorship". Here I focus not on Theognis' much-discussed 'Seal'¹¹ but instead further explore his distinctive rhetoric of authorship.

Ford (1985, 83) writes that Theognis does not embody "a modern concept of the author as the 'original writer'". It is not clear why he is supposed to lack this "modern" concept. If Theognis is thought to lack a sense of originality because he is an oral poet, then we face problems of comparative evidence: oral poets can have a sense of ownership and originality.¹² In any event, it is not clear in precisely what sense Theognis was an oral poet. Ford (1985, 83) writes that "in the archaic period [...] poetry was circulated freely in oral performances rather than in books".¹³ This dichotomy apparently implies that there were no books circulating in the archaic period, but that hypothesis makes it harder to explain why so much archaic poetry, including Theognis', has been transmitted in books.¹⁴

If instead Theognis is thought to lack a sense of originality because he is an early Greek poet, then we face problems of direct evidence: Alcman has some idea of novelty.¹⁵ It is not clear that Alcman's poetry was "traditional and shared to such a degree as to make a modern concept of the author as the 'original writer' irrelevant" (Ford 1985, 83). Theognis' date is notoriously uncertain, but we are not justified in shrouding him in a cloud of mysticising antiquity.¹⁶

entation of shared values".

¹¹ See Condello 2009-10 and Prodi, forthcoming.

¹² Finnegan 1977, 201-6; cf. Niles 1999, 173-93.

¹³ The dichotomy between 'free' oral performances *versus* books would seem to imply that when books existed there also existed mechanisms to ensure their authenticity (Woodbury 1991, 31-2; Edmunds 1997, 33). All ancient texts were susceptible to forgery: cf. Selle 2008b with bibliography.

¹⁴ Compare and contrast Ford (2003, 20-1); Ford *apud* Hubbard 2007, 205 fn. 31. Contrast Spelman 2018a, 167-9; 2019; forthcoming.

¹⁵ νεόχμ' ἔδειξαν (4 fr. 1.6 *PMGF*); μέλος [...] νεοχμόν (14); φέπη τάδε καὶ μέλος Ἀλκμάν | ἐύρε (fr. 39).

¹⁶ The early date of West (1974, 66-71) has not fared well, and with reason: Friis Johansen 1993; Lane Fox 2000, 37-40; van Wees 2000, 52 fn. 2; Hubbard 2007, 195-7; Selle

Rather than supposing that a certain “modern” concept of authorship was for some reason unavailable to Theognis, we might instead try to understand his rhetoric of authorship on its own terms. Ford (1985, 83) contrasts “a modern concept of the author as the ‘original writer’” with “an oral tradition” (84) in which utterances derive from the Muses, “the voices of tradition” (84). Theognis has a relationship with the Muses, but he does not claim to derive the content of his poetry from the divine. One might reasonably ask the immortal Muses for precise information about the distant past, but it would be stranger to ask them for tips on how an elite adult male should live.¹⁷ Theognis instead advertises the mortal sources of his traditional wisdom (27-28):

σοὶ δ' ἐγὼ εὖ φρονέων ὑποθήσομαι, οἷά περ αὐτὸς
Κύρνῳ ἀπὸ τῶν ἀγαθῶν παῖς ἔτ' ἔων ἔμαθον.

With kind thoughts I shall give you the very sort of advice that I myself, Cyrnus, learned from noble men when I was still a child.

This passage explicitly disclaims unique ownership of content: Theognis hands down to the young Cyrnus what had been handed down to him when he was young. And he is not the sole source of such time-honoured wisdom in the present (31-38):

κακοῖσι δὲ μὴ προσομίλει
ἀνδράσιν, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἔχεο·
καὶ μετὰ τοῖσιν πῖνε καὶ ἔσθιε, καὶ μετὰ τοῖσιν
ἵζε, καὶ ἀνδανε τοῖς, ὧν μεγάλη δύναμις.
ἐσθλῶν μὲν γὰρ ἅπ' ἐσθλά μαθήσεται· ἦν δὲ κακοῖσι
συμμίσγηις, ἀπολεῖς καὶ τὸν ἐόντα νόον.
ταῦτα μαθὼν ἀγαθοῖσιν ὁμίλει, καὶ ποτε φήσεις
εὖ συμβουλευεῖν τοῖσι φίλοισιν ἐμέ.

Do not seek the company of base men, but ever cleave to the noble. Drink and eat with them, sit with them, and please those with great power. For from noble men you will learn noble things, but if you mingle with base men, you will lose even what sense you already have. Having learned this, mingle with noble men, and someday you will say that I advise my friends well.

Cyrnus learns that his learning must extend beyond Theognis (μαθήσεται, 35; μαθῶν, 37): he is encouraged to mingle with other no-

2008a, 21-7, 229-46; Allan 2019, 163.

17 Pohlenz 1932, 414: “ein Ἔσπετε νῦν μοι, Μοῦσαι wäre für [Theognis] völlig undenkbar”.

ble men who teach the same sort of things which the noble Theognis teaches. The poet disclaims a monopoly on wisdom to instead figure himself as one node in an ostensibly harmonious network. Authorial unoriginality is inextricable from moral authority.

Why should an ethical didactic poem want to emphasise a strong claim to originality of content? With the debatable exception of mystics and trained philosophers, a pretention to unique moral expertise might be inherently implausible.¹⁸ Theognis instead presents himself in the humbler and more credible guise of one noble man among other noble men.

The wisdom of Theognis' poems does not make them distinctive, but something does. Others now teach at symposia the same sort of traditional lessons that Theognis teaches – and there is no reason to suppose that their teaching is in verse (31-38) – but future symposia will, Theognis claims, perpetuate his poetry in particular and so make it traditional in a different sense (239-243). This is because his poetry is better than other poetry (οὐδέ τις ἀλλάξει κάκιον τοῦσθλοῦ παρεόντος, 21, pointedly mixing the ethical and the aesthetic). 'All those who care about song, even including men to come' (πᾶσι δ' ὅσοισι μέμηλε καὶ ἐσσομένοισιν ἀοιδή, 251)¹⁹ will care about Theognis' song because it is good. His works are the 'gifts of the Muses' (Μουσάων δῶρα, 250), but they are also, simultaneously and more emphatically, his gifts to Cyrnus (σοὶ μὲν ἐγὼ πτέρ' ἔδωκα, 237); he is to be respected as its author, by Cyrnus and by others. Ford (1985, 85) writes that the "pride that allows an artist to identify a unique aesthetic object as his creation is not very different from authorship" and that "Theognis is clearly proud" of his poetry. The concept of unique quality is hard to disentangle from the concept of unique originality, and it is unclear what is to be gained by doing so in this particular case.²⁰

Rather than understanding Theognis as embodying a primitive stage in the evolution of "modern" authorship, we might instead understand his poetics of unoriginality as raising some enduring questions about his genre, not least among them: why should we learn from poetry what we can learn from other sources and through other means? What is special about literary instruction as such?

¹⁸ On moral expertise, see e.g. Hills 2019, who reasonably asks "can there be moral experts?" (470). Cf. Roochnik 1996, 89-177 on Plato.

¹⁹ See Spelman 2018a, 77 fn. 38 for the grammar and Spelman 2018b, 159-60 for the early link between quality and canonicity.

²⁰ Selle 2008a, 312: "die Unterscheidung von Eigentum und Verfasserschaft bringt jedoch keinen Erkenntnisgewinn"; cf. Friis Johansen 1991, 14 fn. 21.

2 The Poetics of Failure

σοὶ μὲν ἐγὼ πτέρ' ἔδωκα, σὺν οἷσ' ἐπ' ἀπείρονα πόντον
πωτήσῃ κατὰ γῆν πᾶσαν ἀειρόμενος
ῥηϊδίως· θοίνης δὲ καὶ εἰλαπίνησι παρέσσηι
ἐν πάσαις, πολλῶν κείμενος ἐν στόμασιν,
καὶ σε σὺν αὐλίσκοισι λιγυφθόγγοις νέοι ἄνδρες
εὐκόσμως ἐρατοὶ καλά τε καὶ λιγέα
ἄισονται. καὶ ὅταν δνοφερῆς ὑπὸ κεύθεσι γαίης
βῆις πολυκωκύτους εἰς Ἄϊδαο δόμους,
οὐδέποτε' οὐδὲ θανῶν ἀπολεῖς κλέος, ἀλλὰ μελήσεις
ἄφθιτον ἀνθρώποις αἰὲν ἔχων ὄνομα
Κύρνε, καθ' Ἑλλάδα γῆν στρωφόμενος ἠδ' ἀνὰ νήσους
ἰχθυόεντα περῶν πόντον ἐπ' ἀτρύγετον,
οὐχ ἵππων νώτοισιν ἐφήμενος, ἀλλὰ σε πέμψει
ἄγλαα Μουσάων δῶρα ἰοστεφάνων·
πᾶσι δ' ὅσοισι μέμηλε καὶ ἔσσομένοισιν αἰοδίη
ἔσσηι ὁμῶς, ὄφρ' ἂν γῆ τε καὶ ἥλιος·
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν ὀλίγης παρὰ σεῦ οὐ τυγχάνω αἰδοῦς,
ἀλλ' ὥσπερ μικρὸν παῖδα λόγοις μ' ἀπαταῖς.

To you I have given wings with which you will fly over the boundless sea and the entire earth, soaring easily. You will be present at all banquets and feasts, reclining in the mouths of many, and with clear-sounding little *auloi* attractive young men will sing of you in fine and clear and orderly fashion. And whenever you go beneath the dark hollows of the earth, into Hades' home full of wailing, never, even after you have died, will you loose your fame, but you with your unwithering name will be a concern to mankind, Cyrnus, as you roam throughout the Greek land and among the islands, crossing over the fish-filled, fruitless sea, not riding on the backs of horses, but it is the splendid gifts of the violet-wreathed Muses that send you on your way. For all those who care about song, even including men to come, you will be alike the subject of song, as long as earth and sun exist. And yet I do not meet with even slight respect from you, but you deceive me with your words, as if I were a small child.

Scholars have long hypothesised that these lines (237-254) rounded out Theognis' original collection with an epilogue, and one can understand why.²¹ We do not have good comparative evidence for what

²¹ So, recently, Rösler 2006; see Selle 2008a, 180-3 for discussion and bibliography. The authenticity of these lines is now generally accepted among those concerned with authenticity (e.g. Friis Johansen 1996, 18-21).

an early collection arranged by its author might have looked like, but the best parallels for the aorist ἔδωκα (237) come from the ends of Pindaric odes.²² Theognis, like Pindar, looks back to his work as a completed affair and simultaneously looks forward to its reception.

This passage juxtaposes absolute triumph in the future with abject failure in the present. Theognis will achieve an enduring reception spanning the Greek world, but he has manifestly failed to teach his singular addressee in the here-and-now. The poet counsels Cyrnus that he could hand down to his sons no finer treasure than that sense of respect which attends on noble men (οὐδένα θησαυρὸν παιρὶν καταθήσῃ ἀμείνω | αἰδοῦς, ἢ τ' ἀγαθοῖς ἀνδράσι Κύρν' ἔπεται, 409-10 ≈ 1161-1162). Cyrnus disrespects the noble man who teaches him this and much else (ὀλίγης παρὰ σεῦ οὐ τυγχάνω αἰδοῦς, 253).²³ Deception, Theognis says, is the hallmark of base men (ἀλλήλους δ' ἀπατῶσιν, 59 ≈ 1113; δόλους ἀπάτας τε πολυπλοκίας τ' ἐρίλησαν, 67); one whose words do not reveal his mind is a bad friend – indeed, he is better as an enemy (ὄς δὲ μῆι γλώσσηι δίχ' ἔχει νόον, οὔτος ἑταῖρος | δειλὸς [West; δεινὸς MSS] Κύρν'· ἐχθρὸς βέλτερος ἢ φίλος ὢν, 91-92). Cyrnus reciprocates such advice about deceitful words by deceiving his friend with words (λόγοις μ' ἀπαταῖς, 254).

Theognis warns Cyrnus that it is hard, and painful, to recognise a deceitful friend (τοῦτο θεὸς κιβδηλότατον ποίησε βροτοῖσιν, | καὶ γνῶναι πάντων τοῦτ' ἀνιηρότατον, 123-124; cf. 117-118). His experience of Cyrnus confirms this lesson (cf. πρὶν πειρηθείης, 126). As it is hard to recognise a deceitful friend, Theognis teaches, so it is easier to deceive one's friend (ἐχθρὸν μὲν χαλεπὸν καὶ δυσμενῆ ἔξαπατῆσαι | Κύρνε· φίλον δὲ φίλωι ράιδιον ἔξαπατᾶν, 1219-1220; cf. 1027-1028, 1037-1038). This is what Cyrnus tries to do to him. Theognis gives his young friend truthful words such as he received when he was a child (παῖς ἔτ' ἐὼν, 28). Cyrnus responds by tricking his mature mentor with lying words as if he were a child (ὥσπερ μικρὸν παῖδα, 254). Theognis' lessons about positive reciprocity among noble friends fall, it seems, on deaf ears (101-112). His gloomy meditations on the rarity of virtue (335-336, 1027-1028) and the scarcity of true friends (75-76, 79-82) turn out all too true. Perhaps Cyrnus has consorted with base men and absorbed their teachings (35-36). Perhaps he has forgotten Theognis' lessons (cf. *Il.* 9.252-259) or failed to take them to heart (cf. Simon. 19 *IEG*²). Maybe he was never all that convinced to begin with.

From Hesiod onwards, the addressees of didactic poetry make for a remarkably passive lot, apparently content to absorb the monologues

²² Spelman 2018a, 63 fn. 2. Bakker 2016, 203-4 discusses the “monumental aorist” and argues for other epigrammatic echoes in this Theognidean passage.

²³ This line unmistakably evokes the *erastes-eromenos* relationship: see 1263-1266 with Vetta 1980, 67-9; cf. Griffith 1983, 43-4; Lear 2011, 381-2.

of authoritative speakers and conventionally unpermitted to break their docile silence.²⁴ Cynrus conforms to type. He is constantly exhorted to do things in the future, but he almost never acts of his own accord in the present.²⁵ Cynrus has enjoyed good things (κάσθλοῖσιν ἔχαιρες, 355) and passively received bad things (ἐξ ἀγαθῶν ἔλαβες κακόν, 357). At 655 he has apparently likewise suffered something bad (παθόντι κακῶς). Elsewhere he has similarly come into some unspecified disaster with Theognis (ἐς πολυάρητον κακόν ἤκομεν, 819), and together they will nip in the bud some incipient bane (κακοῦ καταπαύσομεν ἀρχήν, 1133). Cynrus occasionally copes with vague problems, but in the extant verses addressed to him only in 253-254 is he said to *do* something actively of his own volition.²⁶ Cynrus' sole action, in other words, is to disrespect his teacher in contravention of his teachings. Everyone makes mistakes (109-110, 323-328, 407-408), but Cynrus' mistake is anathema to the ethic into which Theognis tries to initiate him. This must have a programmatic dimension.²⁷

Cynrus' deceit provides an isolated and hence all the less encouraging empirical check on Theognis' didactic credentials. So far from charting his addressee's progress from ignorance to enlightenment, the poet spotlights Cynrus' failure as a student and thereby his own failure as a teacher. If Theognis cannot successfully instruct his addressee, then why should one expect that his words will be any more effective with those countless similar but anonymous youths who will echo his instructions into eternity as they perpetuate Cynrus' fame (241-243)? Whereas Pindar depicts his addressees as learning from older poetry and thus hints at how later audiences might similarly benefit from his work,²⁸ Theognis instead depicts his address-

24 Elsewhere an adult addressee talks back (577-578): “ῥήιον ἐξ ἀγαθοῦ θεῖναι κακόν ἢ κακοῦ ἐσθλόν.” | - μή με διδασκ' οὔτοι τηλικός εἰμι μαθεῖν.

25 Bakker 2017, 105: “there is not much personal interaction with the addressee”.

26 Cynrus is warned that *hybris* will destroy ‘you all’ as it has destroyed great cities (1103-1104), but he need not have personally committed *hybris*. ἀπολεῖ (1104) could be a potential future. ὅμμι (1104) looks like a true plural (cf. 40 ≈ 1081, 541-542, 603-604). Lines 1101-1102 = 1278a-b address someone who has been instructed to abandon the speaker's friendship. West makes this person Cynrus by printing 539-40 as continuous with 1101-1102 (cf. West 1974, 163). Young makes this person Cynrus by printing 1103-1104 as continuous with 1101-1102. The former approach produces less than convincing sense; the latter posits dubious anacoluthon (cf. van Groningen 1966, 405; Selle 2008a, 154-5). Either would support the argument advanced here (cf. Thgn. 35-36).

27 Pohlenz 1932, 425 merits extended quotation: “hätten dann nicht die mißgünstigen Mitbürger, die er v. 24-6 abweist, mit Recht sagen können: ‘Da sieht man, was es mit Theognis' σοφία auf sich hat. Er gibt seinem Kyrnos schöne Lebensregeln, mahnt ihn vor allem zu πίστις und αἰδώς, warnt ihn vor den Menschen, die δόλους τ' ἀπάτας τε üben, und nun zieht er selbst das Fazit, daß seine Mahnungen sich den geringsten Erfolg gehabt haben, daß Kyrnos ihn wie einen dummen Jungen betrügt?’. For Pohlenz, this shows that “das Gedicht bezeichnet einen Abschnitt, keinen Abschluß”.

28 Spelman 2018a, 90-101.

ee as failing to learn from his own poetry and thereby casts doubt on its future utility.

It might be tempting to interpret Theognis' didactic failure as a sort of Ovidian self-deconstruction of authority, but I would prefer to read somewhat differently. Failure is among Theognis' central themes. As the experiences attributed to Cynrus are overwhelmingly negative, so too his teacher features almost exclusively as a loser. Theognis testifies to the value of a good wife (1225-1226), but this is a bright spot on a bleak canvas. He does not understand his fellow Megarians and cannot please them (24, 1184a-b ≈ 367-368). His city is on the verge of political disaster (39-52, 219, 235-236, 541-542, 833-836, 1081-1082b), and, unlike Solon, he is not in a position to do much about it. Base men infiltrate Megara, and their fortunes rise as the fortunes of noble men decline (53-68, 1109-1114). The purity of noble lineages is irreversibly compromised (183-92). Theognis expatiates on the value of wealth (173-178, 179-180, 181-182; cf. 155-158), but others now hold his lands, perhaps because of some disastrous sailing, presumably for trade (1197-1202). He advises Cynrus to please the powerful (34), but he himself is often powerless. He prays to Artemis to rescue him from an evil fate (κακὰς δ' ἀπὸ κήρας ἄλαλκε, 13). He harps on the value, and rarity, of steadfast, trustworthy friends (31-38, 61-68, 69-72, 75-76, 77-78, 79-82, 91-92, 101-112, 119-128, 299-300), but his own friends betray him (οἱ μὲ φίλοι προύδωκαν, 813).²⁹ Even Cynrus deceives him (253-254). In short, 'everything here has gone to hell in a handbasket' (πάντα τὰδ' ἐν κοράκεσσι καὶ ἐν φθόρῳ, 833).

The further one moves away from taking Theognis' poetry as straightforwardly faithful reportage of bitter firsthand experience, and the more seriously one takes his hopes for widespread and enduring reception (19-23, 237-252), the more problematic, and the more interesting, becomes this pervasive emphasis on failure. Why play to win by playing the loser?

The actual reception history of Theognis' poetry is, I think, one of success followed by failure. It is a story of failure in that his work was eventually supplanted by something like the strange text which we read today (see Appendix), but it is a story of success in that his work first achieved considerable renown. Antisthenes composed a treatise entitled *On Theognis*, and Xenophon might have written on the same topic.³⁰ Advising the Cyprian Nicocles, Isocrates puts Theognis on a par with Phocylides and Hesiod as 'those whom they say have been the best advisors for human life' (τούτους φασὶ μὲν ἀρίστους

²⁹ Donlan 1985, 224: "a striking feature of the passages on friendship is their consistently negative quality".

³⁰ See e.g. Prince 2015, 138-9.

γεγενῆσθαι συμβούλους τῷ βίῳ τῷ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, 2.43). Theognis was prominent enough as a teacher of common sense to attract attention from those purporting to teach something beyond common sense (Pl. *Men.* 95c-6a; Xen. *Symp.* 2.4-7; Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1179b.4-10). One might reasonably suppose that Theognis' poetry of elite frustration found an especially sympathetic home among embattled elites under Athenian democracy,³¹ but the documented traces of his reception do not suggest that it was an exclusively Athenian affair. We need to explain why Theognis' poetics of failure succeeded so well.

On one level, Theognis' personal failures are integral to his authorial project. Bleak experience confirms bleak wisdom. Theognis prepares the young Cynrus for an adult life in which wisdom and virtue are of paramount importance (895-896, 1171-1176) and yet insufficient for practical success (129-130, 133-142, 149-150, 159-160, 161-164, 233-234, 1111-1112). This is the world which the mature Theognis inhabits. Hesiod, by contrast, exhorts Perses to start on a path to virtue which, however difficult, promises to lead eventually to a secure, prosperous position (*Op.* 298-316). Theognis' moralising is not so morally simplistic. The wisest didactic poetry might have to teach that wisdom is often not enough.

As Theognis' personal failures are integral to his poetic project, so too his failure to instruct Cynrus forms a paradoxical part of his didactic message. He elsewhere reflects on the difficulties of teaching (429-438):

φῦσαι καὶ θρέψαι ῥᾶιον βροτὸν ἢ φρένας ἔσθλας
ἐνθέμεν· οὐδεὶς πω τοῦτό γ' ἐπεφράσατο,
ᾧ τις σώφρον' ἔθηκε τὸν ἄφρονα κακὸν κακοῦ ἔσθλόν.
εἰ δ' Ἀσκληπιάδαις τοῦτό γ' ἔδωκε θεός,
ἰᾶσθαι κακότητα καὶ ἀτηρὰς φρένας ἀνδρῶν,
πολλοὺς ἂν μισθοὺς καὶ μεγάλους ἔφερον.
εἰ δ' ἦν ποιητόν τε καὶ ἔνθετον ἀνδρὶ νόημα,
οὔ ποτ' ἂν ἐξ ἀγαθοῦ πατρὸς ἔγεντο κακός,
πειθόμενος μῦθοισι σαόφροσιν· ἀλλὰ διδάσκων
οὔ ποτε ποιήσει τὸν κακὸν ἄνδρ' ἀγαθόν.

It is easier to beget and raise a mortal than to put good sense in him. No one has yet devised this, at any rate: the means whereby one makes the fool a wise man and a noble man out of a base man. If the divine had granted this to the Asclepiads, to cure men's baseness and muddled wits, they would be earning many high fees. And if good sense could be produced and placed inside a man, there would never be a base son of a noble father, since he

31 See especially Lane Fox 2000, 45-51.

would heed wise words. But you will never make the base man noble by teaching him.

Plato's Socrates (*Men.* 95c-96a) quotes from this passage and lines 31-35 in order to demonstrate, much to the surprise of his interlocutor,³² that Theognis, the reputedly sagacious teacher of virtue, in fact contradicts himself about whether virtue is teachable. But these lines assert the impossibility of teaching the unteachable, not the impossibility of teaching anyone.³³ Instruction may be by itself insufficient for wisdom, but Theognis' instructions presume that Cynrus already has some sense to build upon (cf. τὸν ἔόντα νόον, 36) and a noble nature receptive to truth. Thus Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* 1179b), interpreting more faithfully and/or earnestly than his teacher, quotes from this passage to show that words are not in themselves sufficient (αὐτάρκεις, 4): discourse can set noble youths on a noble path, but it is useless in most cases (τοὺς δὲ πολλοὺς ἀδυνατεῖν πρὸς καλοκαγαθίαν προτρέψασθαι, 10).

Plato belongs to a distinguished line of thinkers who referred to Theognis' reflections on the processes and limitations of teaching virtue;³⁴ Theognis' poetry was itself already much interested in such issues. It might be impossible to instruct the base, but it is not easy to instruct the noble, as Theognis' failure to teach Cynrus shows. The truest didactic poetry might have to teach that didactic poetry will fail more often than it succeeds.

Theognis' failure to instruct Cynrus is integral to his didactic message, but it is also part of a larger strategy whereby the poet's relationship to his singular addressee prefigures his relationship to others. As Theognis tries to teach and seduce Cynrus, so he tries to teach and, in a different sense, seduce wider audiences.³⁵ The poet promises Cynrus that 'someday you will say that I counsel my friends well' (καί ποτε φήσεις | εὖ συμβουλεύειν τοῖσι φίλοισιν ἐμέ, 37-38; cf. 99-100 = 1164c-d, 755-756). His words are formally addressed only to a singular *eromenos*, but the pointed plural 'my friends' (τοῖσι φίλοισιν, 38) programmatically winks at others who are invited to join a widening circle of friendship extending outwards from its paradigmatic

³² Ἐν ποίοις ἔπεισιν; (95d.4) with Bluck (1961, 392): "Meno is probably somewhat shocked at the idea that Theognis might be inconsistent in this matter".

³³ So, rightly, e.g. Woodbury 1951, 50-1; van Groningen 1966, 174.

³⁴ Xen. *Symp.* 2.4-7; *Mem.* 1.2.20-2; Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1170a.11-13, 1172a.12-13; cf. Ar. *Av.* 1362-1363.

³⁵ On the parallel configurations of lover-beloved-audience and teacher-student-audience in erotic and didactic poetry see, respectively, Culler 2015, 197-211 and Konstan 1993, 11-12, who observes that Cynrus is both student and beloved.

ic epicenter, 'my friend Cyrnus' (φίλε Κύρνε, 181, 539).³⁶ As later audiences echo Theognis' relationship to Cyrnus, so the social setting of their relationship is reproduced in reception: Theognis addresses Cyrnus in a symposium (33-38), and endless symposia will perpetuate his words (239-250).³⁷

Pindar similarly scripts a future reception which extends outwards from the inscribed moment of performance to encompass an ever widening audience notionally united by their appreciation of his poetry and its values. And yet Pindar and Theognis work very differently. Reading or re-performing Pindar's victory odes, one joins an unending chorus of the noble and the refined who soar above petty egoism (i.e. φθόνος) to perpetuate the sublime praise of elite champions whose triumph manifests inherited excellence, the propitious design of destiny, and the beneficent favour of the gods; in reading and re-performing Theognis, one befriends an elite loser and joins his sad symposium.

Pindar echoes present happiness into the future; Theognis speaks from a bleak present and envisions a better future, both in the short term and in the long term. The poet projects Cyrnus' praise of his teaching into an indefinite future: 'someday you will say (καί ποτε φήσεις, 37) that I counsel my friends well'; for the present, he can only prepare his young *eromenos* for a mature life which he has not yet experienced firsthand (cf. e.g. γνώσει, 'you will recognise', 65; εύρήσεις, 'you will find', 79). Now Cyrnus might be corrupted by base men (ἦν δὲ κακοῖσιν | συμμίσηγης, ἀπολεῖς καὶ τὸν ἔοντα νόον, 35-36; cf. 101-102, 305-308) and so led into disaster. Only the lessons of later life can provide an independent criterion for him to judge the truth of Theognis' lessons; only an adult Cyrnus can someday fulfil his teacher's injunction to 'become a witness to my truthfulness' (μάρτυς ἐγώ, σὺ δ' ἔμοι γίνου ἀληθοσύνης, 1226)³⁸ in his advice about marriage and in his advice about much else. The young Cyrnus might now fail to respect his teacher (253-254), but Theognis promises that a grownup Cyrnus someday will live out his teachings, discover their value for himself, and confirm that the poet does indeed advise his friends well.

Theognis similarly depicts present failure but envisions subsequent success in his relationship to wider audiences. As Cyrnus' praise is projected into an imagined future (καί ποτε φήσεις, 37), so too is the praise of mankind most generally (22-24):

³⁶ Cf. Semonides 1 *IEG*², which moves from a singular addressee (ὦ παῖ, 1) to pointed plurals (εἰ δ' ἔμοι πιθοῖατο, | οὐκ ἂν κακῶν ἐρώμιεν, 22-23).

³⁷ Spelman 2018a, 77, 82-4.

³⁸ The syntax is strange, but probably Cyrnus is enjoined to marry a good wife, as Theognis has done: cf. Hudson-Williams 1910, 245; van Groningen 1966, 441; West 1974, 165; Allan 2019, 179.

ᾧδε δὲ πᾶς τις ἔρεϊ: “Θεύγνιδός ἐστιν ἔπη
τοῦ Μεγαρέως· πάντας δὲ κατ’ ἀνθρώπους ὀνομαστός”.
ἀστοῖσιν δ’ οὔπω πᾶσιν ἀδεῖν δύναμαι.

... thus everyone will say: ‘these are the verses of Theognis of Megara; his name is famous throughout all mankind.’ But I am not yet able to please all my fellow townsmen.³⁹

Theognis’ failure to satisfy ‘all’ Megarians is contrasted with his friendly instruction to the singular Cyrnus (σοὶ δ’ ἐγὼ εἶ φρονέων ὑποθήσομαι, 27). Intimate teaching among elite friends is thus set apart from the less congenial public realm. And yet Theognis envisions that someday *each and every person* will praise his work (πᾶς τις ἔρεϊ, 22), and this must include all Megarians.⁴⁰ Theognis does not yet (οὔπω, 24) please his fellow citizens, but someday, against all odds, he will find favour with the locals and with everybody else besides. He now retreats from the city into the haven of private instruction, but he simultaneously imagines a nearly unimaginable future in which his poetry is triumphant in the end.

Theognis depicts localised present failure and implicates audiences in greater future success. Everyone who says ‘everyone will say: “these are the verses of Theognis of Megara; his name is famous throughout all mankind”’ (22-23) thereby nudges hyperbole a bit further in the direction of truth. Whereas Pindar often invites his audiences to perpetuate a static story of unending success, Theognis invites his audiences to advance a redemptive narrative arc from failure toward success. The documented success of his poetry in the early Greek world would suggest that his poetics of unoriginal failure was not a complete failure after all.

³⁹ For the text and translation offered here see Friis Johansen 1991, 16-19; Condello 2009-10, 92-5; Spelman 2018a, 122 fn. 115.

⁴⁰ Compare and contrast Nagy 1985, 30-1, 35.

Appendix: Textual History

The textual history of the *Theognidea* is so interesting that it risks crowding out other topics of discussion, but many literary interpretations must presume at least some basic theory of textual history. My essay supposes that an early collection of Theognis' poetry was eventually supplanted by something like that strange text which we read today. The Theognidean *testimonia*, assembled by Selle (2008a, 394-423), provide evidence for this hypothesis. "Our testimony for Theognis are relatively abundant" (Young 1964, 386); they ought to be able to tell us something.

I divide our corpus into four categories, which, as scholars have long seen, are not randomly distributed throughout the text: Category I comprises pieces addressed to Cynrus/Polypaides; Category II comprises pieces which, in more or less different versions, were also known in antiquity as the work of poets other than Theognis;⁴¹ Category III comprises pieces formally addressed to any mortal besides Cynrus;⁴² Category IV comprises everything else.

Addresses to Cynrus often serve no obvious function beyond signaling Theognidean authorship (cf. 246-247); 'Cynrus-poems' thus have a good *prima facie* claim to belong in a collection of Theognis' poetry - no matter what we think of his 'Seal'.⁴³ It seems unlikely that somebody seeking to pass his verse off as Theognis' would produce lines which are, like those in Category III, addressed to somebody else. Pieces in Category II likewise have a weak *prima facie* claim to belong in a collection of Theognidean poetry insofar as they did in fact belong elsewhere.

Using West's text and its divisions between pieces, our corpus breaks down thus:⁴⁴

⁴¹ I include in Category II 467-496 and 667-682 (= Evenus fr. *8ab IEG²): cf. Hudson-Williams 1910, 34-5; Friis Johansen 1993, 15-16; Bowie 1997, 66; 2012, 123-4; Capra 2016, 88; differently Colesanti 2011, 102-7. These lines, addressed to a certain Simonides, would otherwise belong in Category III.

⁴² φίλε (99); θυμέ (213); ὄνθρωπι' (453); Ὀνομάκριτε (503); Κλεάριστε (511); ἄνθρωπι' (595); Χαίρων (691, a debatable case); θυμέ (695); φίλ' ἑταῖρε (753); Σκύθα (829); φίλε θυμέ (878); Δημόκλεις (923); Ἀκάδημε (993); ἀνθρώποις (1007); θυμέ (1029); Τιμαγόρα (1059); φίλε θυμέ (1070a); Δημόναξ (1085); φίλε (1138); φίλε (1164c); Ἀργυρι (1212).

⁴³ Friis Johansen (1996, 10): "in a Cynrus-poem the burden of proof rests with those who deny its Theognidean authorship, while in a non-Cynrus poem it is the other way around" (cf. e.g. Jacoby 1961, 428). Fain (2006) and Bakker (2017) revise the theory that Theognis' 'Seal' is the address to Cynrus; see further Condello 2009-10, 96-103.

⁴⁴ Including doublets and verses indirectly transmitted but excluding 'Book Two'. These 168 verses, transmitted in one manuscript, have a very different textual history: so, most recently, Bowie 2012, 132-44; Selle 2013, 471-2. Nobody in antiquity ever attributes to Theognis any verses from 'Book Two', and this is itself a good reason to think that 'Book Two' did not circulate as the work of a major author from an early date: Hudson-Williams 1910, 56; Jacoby 1961, 435; Woodbury 1951, 6; Selle 2008a, 101-2; Bowie

Category	Lines	Percentage of corpus
I	288	22.78
II	88	6.96
III	134	10.60
IV	754	59.65

From Plato to Stobaeus, verses are ascribed to Theognis 117 times.⁴⁵ A null hypothesis would posit a random distribution of ascriptions with each category claiming a share of ascriptions proportionate to its share of the corpus. In 58 ascriptions to Theognis, Stobaeus, who is often thought to have quoted from a collection like ours,⁴⁶ gives something close to what the null hypothesis predicts:

Category	Number of ascriptions	Percentage of ascriptions
I	13	22.41
II	5	8.62
III	5	8.62
IV	35	60.34

The 90 total ascriptions from Athenaeus to Stobaeus likewise yield something like what the null hypothesis predicts:

Category	Number of ascriptions	Percentage of ascriptions
I	26	28.89
II	7	7.78
III	6	6.67
IV	51	56.67

While later ascriptions are more or less randomly distributed, early ascriptions are not. Before Athenaeus, verses are attributed to Theognis 27 times:

2012, 136. 'Book Two' contains 4 lines in Category I (1353-1356), 12 lines in Category II (1253-1254 = Solon 23 *IEG*²; 1341-1350 = Evenus *8c *IEG*², addressed to a certain Simonides), and 88 lines in Category III (chiefly the ὦ παῖ poems).

⁴⁵ I ignore cases which do not bear on named authorship (e.g. ὁ ποιητὴς ὅς ἔφη, Pl. *Lys.* 212e = T4, quoting Thgn. 1253-1254 = Solon 23 *IEG*²). "Wir können ernsthaft nur mit namentlichen Zitaten arbeiten" (Jacoby 1961, 451).

⁴⁶ E.g. Selle 2008a, 90-3; Bowie 2010, 602-6; compare and contrast Ferreri 2011, 293-337.

Category	Number of ascriptions	Percentage of ascriptions
I	13	48.15
II	0	0
III	0	0
IV	14	51.85

If we depart from West's edition and follow others in regarding lines 31-38 as contiguous with the address to Cynrus in line 28, as I think that we should,⁴⁷ then the early preference for ascribing to Theognis verses from Category I becomes still stronger: 17 of 27 attributions (62.96 %).

Other considerations point in the same direction. Up to Athenaeus, verses in Category II are attributed to an author 14 times; they are always ascribed to someone other than Theognis. From Athenaeus to Stobaeus, verses in Category II are ascribed to an author another 16 times: 7 times to Theognis and 9 times to somebody else. At least during this later period, as we know from other evidence, (versions of) verses in Category II circulated both as the work of Theognis and as the work of others.⁴⁸ The very different pattern of early ascriptions suggests that this had not always been the case.

Over time the pieces from Category IV ascribed to Theognis more frequently conform less well with the moralising didactic poetics of the 'Cynrus-poems' and with the early *testimonia* which agree in casting Theognis as a moralising didactic poet. Nobody attributes to Theognis clearly suspect verses from Category IV before such time as we know that an anthology like ours was in circulation (see below).⁴⁹

Before Athenaeus, nobody attributes to Theognis verses from Category III; Athenaeus (T73), like Stobaeus after him (T122), attributes to Theognis verses from a piece addressed to a certain Simonides which Aristotle (T9, 16) knew as the work of Evenus and which sounds unlike the 'Cynrus-poems' (467-496 = Evenus fr. *8a IEG²).

⁴⁷ Carrière 1948b, 3; van Groningen 1966, 25-6; Steffen 1968, 12-23; Young 1971, 3-4; Gerber 1999, 178; Friis Johansen 1991, 31-7; Hubbard 2007, 207-10; Selle 2008a, 315-6; Faraone 2008, 57-9.

⁴⁸ Clement of Alexandria (T83) contrasts two versions of the same verse, attributing one to Solon and the other to Theognis. Stobaeus cites the same verses twice, once as Solon and once as Theognis (T121, 129).

⁴⁹ For 31-38, ascribed to Theognis by Plato (T3), Xenophon (T6), Aristotle (T12), and Musonius (T37), see above. 429-438, ascribed to Theognis by Plato (T3) and Aristotle (T14), have clear connections with 31-38. 11-14, ascribed to Theognis by Aristotle (T19), refer to Megarian cult. 605-606, ascribed to Theognis by Teles (T32), sound like 1171-1176. 215-216, ascribed to Theognis three times by Plutarch (T47, 50, 51), are a complicated case (cf. 1071-1072). 509-510, ascribed to Theognis by Galen (T58) and Artemiodorus (T64), are sympotic but broadly didactic. 773-788, ascribed to Theognis by Harpocration (T59), are very probably too late to be Theognis'.

Before Athenaeus, nobody attributes to Theognis verses addressing any mortal besides Cynrus; Athenaeus (T71), like Eustathius after him (T158), attributes to Theognis verses from a piece which addresses a certain Academus and which sounds nothing like the 'Cynrus-poems' (993-1002).

These considerations together support the hypothesis that early authors knew a different collection of Theognis' poetry, in which verses in Category I featured more prominently and in which pieces from Categories II and III did not feature.⁵⁰ Modern scholars have pursued various 'unitarian' approaches to our *Theognidea*,⁵¹ but it seems improbable that a text like ours circulated from an early date. The various oddities of our corpus have often been explained with reference to the oral dynamics of early Greek sympotic culture, but the ascription of something like our *Theognidea* to Theognis was probably the work of a relatively late age.⁵² Nothing in our collection obviously postdates the fifth century, but this does not entail that everything in our collection was transmitted under Theognis' name from early on.

There is no good reason to suppose that the text of Theognis circulating in the classical period was any more or less inauthentic or unstable than the various other texts of older poetry which were also then in circulation. But it remains unclear just what that classical collection of Theognis' poetry looked like.⁵³ Nor do we know precisely what happened to it and when.⁵⁴ By treating as Theognis' work only 'Cynrus-poems' and pieces ascribed to Theognis by classical authors, we are unlikely to refer to all or only genuine extant pieces or to all of Theognis' poetry.⁵⁵ And yet such an approach, limited as it is, nonetheless offers some hope for gaining a better sense of what Theognis' poetry was like.

50 Other discussions of the *testimonia* have, significantly, tended toward 'analytical' conclusions broadly similar to those adopted here: cf. Jacoby 1961, 439-55; Carrière 1948a, 56-94; Peretti 1953; West 1974, 55-9; Bowie 1997, 65-6; 2012; Selle 2008a, 43-4, 74-5.

51 See, most recently, Colesanti 2011; cf. Selle 2014 and Condello 2015.

52 Lear 2011, 378 frames the issue as a debate between "oralists" and "anthologists", but both sides should be happy to invoke both orality and anthologies as explanatory mechanisms. I would regard as implausible any textual history which did not invoke writing *and* orality *and* symposia *and* anthologies.

53 Cf. West 1974, 40-2.

54 All published papyri so far reveal a text like ours, and these "require at least an organisation and compositional date of the first century AD for copying and dissemination" (Brusuelas 2016, 48).

55 429-38, known to Plato and Aristotle as Theognis' poetry, contain no address to Cynrus in ten lines. Stobaeus quotes six verses addressed to Cynrus which are not transmitted in the manuscripts (1221-1226). Κύρνε is a variant reading at 156, 213. θυμέ, φίλους κατὰ πάντας ἐπίστρεφε ποικίλον ἦθος (Thgn. 213) ≈ Κύρνε, φίλους κατὰ πάντας ἐπίστρεφε ποικίλον ἦθος (1071).

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