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## Classical Genre in Theory and Practice

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## Classical Genre in Theory and Practice

### Abstract

It was once believed that the ancients invented and perfected certain genres and that the works they left might serve as models for later writers. Today belief in ideal patterns is a distant memory, and our interest in genre takes other forms. Classicists, by engaging with the specific problems presented by Greek and Roman literature and with the speculative discourse taking place throughout literary studies, have developed very different approaches to genre from the ones that prevailed in the past; but outside of classics, it appears that a traditional (and, now, outmoded) conception of the role that genre plays in classical literature continues to hold sway. This conception has a distinguished pedigree, and in fact derives from classical genre theory. But the practice of ancient writers was much more sophisticated than anything that classical theory could account for, and it is mainly on this practice that classicists now base their understanding of ancient ideas about genre. In this essay, I will briefly run over some familiar aspects of classical genre theory, but will be mainly concerned to illustrate how attention to the practice of ancient writers has led to an outlook on Greek and especially Roman literary genres that is very different from the traditional story and that has much more to contribute to the contemporary discourse about genre.

### Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Classics

# Classical Genre in Theory and Practice

Joseph Farrell

IT WAS ONCE BELIEVED that the ancients invented and perfected certain genres and that the works they left might serve as models for later writers. Today belief in ideal patterns is a distant memory, and our interest in genre takes other forms. Classicists, by engaging with the specific problems presented by Greek and Roman literature and with the speculative discourse taking place throughout literary studies, have developed very different approaches to genre from the ones that prevailed in the past; but outside of classics, it appears that a traditional (and, now, outmoded) conception of the role that genre plays in classical literature continues to hold sway. This conception has a distinguished pedigree, and in fact derives from classical genre theory. But the practice of ancient writers was much more sophisticated than anything that classical theory could account for, and it is mainly on this practice that classicists now base their understanding of ancient ideas about genre.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I will briefly run over some familiar aspects of classical genre theory, but will be mainly concerned to illustrate how attention to the practice of ancient writers has led to an outlook on Greek and especially Roman literary genres that is very different from the traditional story and that has much more to contribute to the contemporary discourse about genre.

## 1. Classical Ways of Theorizing Genre

Classical genre theory was a powerfully essentializing discourse. Its essentializing tendencies expressed themselves in at least two ways. First, it was widely assumed in antiquity that the kind of poetry that a person wrote was linked to his character. Second, ancient critics further assumed the existence of a similar link between genre and metrical form. In different strains of critical discourse these two kinds of essentialism might reinforce one another, fail to interact, or even operate at cross-purposes. I make this point to establish that classical genre-theory, while always insisting on the essentializing nature of genre, was neither uniform nor wholly self-consistent in other respects;

and this fact opened the door for poets to exploit the tendentiousness of such essentializing assumptions, as we shall see.

Classical genre theory began to take shape within the Platonic theory of imitation.<sup>2</sup> In keeping with the idea that poetry is a mimetic art, and that *mimesis* is a natural capacity of all human beings, Plato takes it for granted that different individuals will work in genres suited to their respective characters. In the *Republic* (394e–395b) he makes Socrates base an argument concerning the natural capacities of “guardians” in his ideal state on the belief that the same person could not write both tragedy and comedy, or indeed even act in both kinds of drama.<sup>3</sup> Plato’s pupil Aristotle later explains the origin of genres with reference to the same belief: “We have, then, a natural instinct for representation and for tune and rhythm—for meters are obviously sections of rhythms—and starting with these instincts men very gradually developed them until they produced poetry out of their improvisations. Poetry then split into two kinds according to the poet’s nature. For the more serious poets represented the noble deeds of noble men, while those of a less exalted nature represented the actions of inferior men, at first writing satire just as the others at first wrote hymns and eulogies.”<sup>4</sup> From this statement it is obvious that Aristotle classifies genres by the kinds of actions that they represent, but that this in itself is not the primary consideration; for the choice to represent this or that kind of action will be a function of the poet’s own character. Genre is thus an expression of character rather than a choice to be made among several freely available kinds of action or literary forms. A poet of serious character will produce serious poetry, which will involve the imitation of serious actions; a poet of less noble character will produce less exalted poetry that imitates baser actions. Genre is thus an expression of the affinity of certain individuals for imitating certain kinds of actions, and it derives from a similarity of character between the doer and the imitating poet.

Aristotle’s theory of a general division between two kinds of poetry, the one “serious” and “noble” in character, the other “less exalted” and “inferior,” quickly becomes involved in formal criteria. Already in the example quoted above, he speaks of different meters as somehow implicated in the imitation of different kinds of action. And in general, ancient critics regarded particular meters as appropriate to the ethos of this or that particular genre. As a matter of fact, in the language of most critics, who are less concerned than Aristotle to give a full account of how different genres came into being, metrical form rather than ethos stands as the primary marker of generic identity. In this respect, ancient critics are very much at odds with their modern counterparts. To most of us and for most purposes the poetry of Homer, Hesiod, and Theocritus seems to belong to several different genres, but in the vocabulary of most ancient critics, it was all *epos*—that is, it was composed in the epic

meter, the dactylic hexameter catalectic. The majority of ancient critics share this assumption.<sup>5</sup> And while terminology does exist to distinguish between heroic and bucolic *epos* as subgenres, there is no ancient term in general use for the kind of poetry represented by other works—all of them composed in the epic meter—such as Hesiod’s *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, Aratus’s *Phaenomena*, Lucretius’s poem on the nature of the universe, Virgil’s *Georgics*, Manilius’s *Astronomica*, and so on. We consider these to be “didactic” poems, but ancient critics barely recognized this as a proper category of poetry.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the presocratic philosopher Empedocles composed scientific poetry in the epic meter, and Lucretius in particular acknowledges him (along with the epic poets Homer and Ennius) as an important forerunner.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, however, far from recognizing Empedocles as an *epopoios* (epicist) in the tradition of Homer, does not even consider him a poet: “Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except the metre, so that it would be proper to call the one a poet and the other not a poet but a scientist (*physiologon*)” (P1447b). In fact it is clear that, for Aristotle, meter is a secondary factor for generic classification, one that generally follows ethos. But this correlation is not always present. Among those whom Aristotle does consider poets, it is ethos rather than meter that ultimately distinguishes one genre from another. For instance, Aristotle discusses the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as tragic poetry not because they share overt formal characteristics with the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, since they do not, but on the basis of their comparable seriousness of outlook and nobility of character (P 1448b). Aristotle also asserts that Old Comedy was marked by what he calls *iambikê idea* (P 1449b)—literally its “iambic form”; but Aristotle is talking not about comedy’s use of iambic meters, a characteristic that it happens to share with tragedy and other genres. Once again, he points to ethos, in this case the invective spirit that Old Comedy shares with the poetry of Archilochus and Hipponax, who attacked their enemies, whether they were real or fictional, using iambic (as well as other) meters.<sup>8</sup>

For Aristotle, then, a correlation between immanent ethos and overt metrical form generally does exist, but it is not invariable. It is in his work that we see some awareness of the issues that might have led to a less procrustean theory of genre. He recognizes, for instance, that Homer, though composing in the epic meter, can be considered as a tragic poet, while Empedocles, composing in same epic meter, is no poet at all but merely the versifier of a scientific treatise.<sup>9</sup> But even if we find in Aristotle the first theoretical movement towards the decoupling of genre from metrical form, nevertheless Aristotle obviously does regard genre as having some sort of immanent character. Furthermore, he tends to agree with other critics in holding that individual meters are better suited to different themes and ideas; thus iambic meters are specifically

suited to satire and to representation of base characters (*P* 1448b) and are the proper meter for dialogue (*P* 1449a) and for representing action (*P* 1459b), while epic is statelier and better suited to narrative (*P* 1459b–1460a). Even Aristotle, then, who is surely the most advanced of ancient genre theorists, goes only so far in decoupling the idea of genre from that of form. And as far as most ancient critics are concerned, such issues are just not very interesting; or rather, these critics show no awareness that the issues exist. For them it is the metrical form of a poem that counts.

This observation brings us to a second, fundamental point, important because it underpins modern assumptions about ancient conceptions of genre. Ancient theorists and critics do not recognize generic ambiguity as an issue. They all share a certain confidence that poems do indeed belong unambiguously to one genre or another. They show no interest at all in generic indeterminacy, and do not even seem to recognize the possibility that the question of a poem's genre might be open for discussion. This is perhaps odd. Since Aristotle at least shows that it was possible to discuss an epic poem as if it were a tragedy, one can easily imagine an argument over whether the *Iliad* “really was” an epic or a tragedy. Of course, such an argument would in fact be about methodology, and not about generic indeterminacy, since both sides would agree that the *Iliad* “really did belong” to one and only one genre. Ancient critics simply do not recognize the possibility that the *Iliad* might belong to both the epic and the tragic genres, or that it might be useful for some purposes to consider it as an epic and for others as a tragedy, or that it could stand partly inside and partly outside both these genres, combining elements of each. Still less did they regard genre itself as a slippery or even problematic concept. Instead, genre was felt to be an immanent and unambiguous characteristic of all poems, not putty in the hands of an inventive poet, and not a discursive tool to be invoked at will by critics for the sake of the argument.<sup>10</sup>

So much for the theorists. The poets as well, at least in their most explicit statements concerning generic self-awareness, insist on a stable relationship between genre and metrical form on the one hand and ethos on the other. They had done so, in fact, long before the first treatise of literary theory was written. But when it comes to the practice of these same poets, the situation is very different, as we shall presently see.

## 2. Intergeneric Relations in Archaic and Classical Poetry

At first glance, the attitudes of ancient poets seem no different from those of the critics. Indeed, it is probable that the critics took as one starting point for their speculations on genre some of the programmatic

statements in which the poets define their enterprise in terms of genre.<sup>11</sup> When Pindar for instance declares his intention to praise Theron of Acragas, he invokes his “hymns that command the lyre” (*anaxiphorminges hymnoi*)—that is, he announces himself as a lyric poet.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, when Horace protests his inability to praise Agrippa’s military exploits, he states that the theme requires an epic poet, and that his lyric verses will not do.<sup>13</sup> Already it is clear that there is a highly argumentative element at least in Horace’s position, because Pindar, using lyric meters, had written poetry in praise of powerful men not altogether different from Agrippa; and elsewhere Horace shows a keen interest in expanding his lyric portfolio in Pindaric directions.<sup>14</sup> But the specific trajectory of Horace’s argument would be impossible if he could not refer to widespread assumptions that individual meters were capable of being vehicles for certain themes and not for others. The extent to which he actually shared these assumptions is, however, another question entirely.

The generic and conventional aspects of poetic self-representation, as our Horatian example suggests, appear with great clarity when poets contrast themselves with one another. Pindar, again, in his victory odes was concerned to represent himself as a praise poet worthy to celebrate distinguished patrons. He did so partly by drawing distinctions between himself and Archilochus: “God brings everything to pass according to his wishes; god, who overtakes even the flying eagle and outstrips the dolphin in the sea, bends the arrogant heart of many a man, but gives to others eternal glory that will never fade. Now I must shun the fierce and biting tooth of slanderous words. From of old have I seen sharp-tongued Archilochus, struggling and needy, grown fat on the harsh words of hate. The best that fate can bring is wealth joined with the happy gift of wisdom.”<sup>15</sup> Pindar’s motive here is to use Archilochus as an archetype of the blame poet and thus as an antitype of the praise poet that he himself claims to be. The contrast that is drawn involves Pindar and Archilochus as individuals to an insignificant degree in comparison with the contrasting generic forces that these names represent. Pindar’s Archilochus is merely a foil that serves to throw his own qualities—that is, the qualities of his genre—into flattering relief. Such a passage tells us nothing about the actual personality of either man, but it does create an impression of character that was felt to be appropriate to the genres involved, and thus to illustrate the antithetical relationship between the poetry of praise and the poetry of blame.<sup>16</sup>

There is another sense, however, in which Pindar can be seen not merely to take for granted the boundaries between one genre and another, but simultaneously to test and then to reassert them. Gregory Nagy has convincingly analyzed this passage in a way that reveals its generic argument: Pindar is not concerned here with Archilochus specifically, but instead is saying, in effect, “As a practitioner of praise

poetry, there are certain things that I cannot do; by doing them, I would be violating the rules of my chosen genre and observing those of another." This is quite a gratuitous statement, of course. It is perfectly obvious that Pindar is a praise poet. It is equally obvious that he is a lyric poet, since his poems were accompanied by the lyre and sung in lyric meters, and that his individual poems belong to various lyric subgenres, such as victory odes, paeans, and so forth. Why does he find it necessary to say here that he must not be like Archilochus? The answer to this question is also clear: in this poem he metes out not only praise, but also blame. This is hardly an exceptional occurrence in the victory odes: one productive line of research in recent years has brought out the existence of a quite definite element of criticism or belittlement, of the honorand as well as other figures, in Pindar's poetry.<sup>17</sup> Modern discourse theory has little trouble accounting for the presence of supposedly antithetical elements within poems of a given genre. Ancient theory, however, was incapable even of recognizing such dissonant elements as exceptions to a general rule. Ancient practitioners were no more articulate in their comments on these dissonances, but they were more attentive to them than were the critics. Pindaric blame is a very different thing from Archilochean blame. It is not obscene, for example, nor does it adopt a vulgar or a rancorous pose. Nevertheless, it needs to be explained. Pindar, therefore, by saying at this particular juncture, "But I must not be like Archilochus," does two things. On the one hand, he reaffirms his generic orientation as a praise poet. On the other, he admits, or perhaps insists, that the poetry of praise and the poetry of blame—conceptual opposites if such there ever were—have something in common, and that in fact praise poetry can include elements of blame.

In the earliest periods evidence that the poets wrote with this kind of generic self-awareness is rather scarce. Even in the archaic and classical periods of Greek literature, however, we can observe a higher degree of generic self-consciousness than classical theory would have led us to expect. With time one finds an ever-greater sense of adventure until, by the Hellenistic and Roman periods, it comes to seem that testing and even violating generic boundaries was not merely an inevitable and accidental consequence of writing in any genre, but an important aspect of the poet's craft.

Certain habits remain fairly stable over this entire span of time. Our Pindaric illustration indicates a persistent tendency on the part of Greek and Roman poets to declare their generic allegiances (or to comment on the generic constraints that they faced) in dyadic terms. Such declarations frequently take the form, "I am doing X, which is to say, the opposite of Y." This habit discloses a keen awareness on the poets' part that the different genres in question are more than casually linked.

Indeed, each necessarily includes the other within its conceptual framework, as an opposite to be sure, but one that is very like a twin. One sees glimpses of this tendency in the surviving fragments of archaic poetry, in which authors as diverse as Sappho and Hipponax use epic language and imagery to construct two very different kinds of ethos that are opposite to that of Homeric epos and simultaneously opposite to one another as well.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, the practice of these poets can be made to fit within a conceptual structure that treats genres as quite separate compartments, and it is possible that what we now see as a high degree of overlap among them was not a factor in how the poets saw their own work. But the more attention one pays to the material, the more it seems that denying these poets an awareness about the instability of generic categories stems from nothing more than a misguided desire to believe that the practice of ancient poets was perfectly congruent with the (after all, rather primitive and simplistic) theories of ancient literary critics.

The comic poetry of Athens is a conspicuous example of this phenomenon. As in the case of tragedy, the origins of comedy are murky in the extreme, but the developed form in which we know it is tied firmly to annual religious observances at Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries. The Old Comedy of the fifth century, which for us is represented mainly by the eleven surviving plays of Aristophanes, resembled tragedy not only in the circumstances of its performance (at festivals in competitions among three playwrights) or in the general structure of the plays themselves (alternation between dialogues normally composed in iambic meters spoken by a limited number of actors, and songs in lyric meters sung and danced by a chorus), but also in the comic poets' highly developed sense of generic self-consciousness. Passages of "para-tragedy," in which the more "elevated" diction and more restrictive metrical conventions of tragic style are adopted for the purpose of generic travesty, are frequent in Old Comedy.<sup>19</sup> The popular etymology of *tragoidia* as "goat song" (explained variously in antiquity with reference to supposedly original practices that had fallen into disuse) finds its mocking counterpart in the idea of comedy as *trugoidia* or "dregs song."<sup>20</sup> Aristophanes even makes the tragic poets Agathon, Euripides, and Aeschylus into characters in his plays.<sup>21</sup> Thus Old Comedy defined itself in some measure as "not-tragedy," but did so by taking advantage of its pronounced formal and institutional similarities to tragedy. This practice is all the more striking in that tragic competitions themselves incorporated a kind of generic opposite, and one not entirely dissimilar from comedy, in the form of a satyr play that travestied the ethos of tragedy and, in some cases at least, travestied a myth that the poet had subjected to extended exploration in a trilogy of tragedies performed on the same day as the satyr play.<sup>22</sup> But what is often

seen, in keeping with ancient critical habits, as a dyadic relationship is in fact more complex: at least one scholar has argued for a pointedly parodic relationship, parallel to what one finds in “para-tragedy,” between comedy and other genres as well.<sup>23</sup> Nor is it the case that comedy can recognize only parodic relationships. It seems clear, as I have already noted, that the poets of Old Comedy saw themselves as lineal descendants of the iambic poets of earlier days and staged this relationship in ways that parallel their staging of the sibling relationship between comedy and tragedy. Cratinus, for instance, an older contemporary of Aristophanes, produced a play, now lost, that bore the title *Archilochi*—that is, one that featured multiple copies of, or followers of, the iambic poet Archilochus, possibly as the chorus. Whether such evidence indicates that the relationship between Old Comedy and iambus is in fact an organic one, or one constructed by the comic poets for purposes of their own, the similarity between the genres and, more important, the poets’ awareness of this similarity and their willingness to argue in favor of it, speaks clearly to their interest in the areas shared between notionally distinct genres.

In these examples, relationships of generic doubling involve situations in which one of the genres in question enjoys a “higher” status than the other, whether because it is of greater antiquity (as is the case with iambus) or simply as a matter of definition (as is the case with tragedy). In such situations, it is the “lower” genre (in both these cases, comedy) that comments on the relationship, whether that relationship is constructed along lines of succession or of parody. But intergeneric awareness clearly works in other ways as well. Despite substantial institutional continuities, the genre of comedy changed so much between the fifth and fourth centuries that the later dramas of Menander and his contemporaries are distinguished from the work of their predecessors by the designation “New Comedy.” Already in antiquity it was obvious that standard New Comic plots derived from situations that had previously been explored in tragedy above all by Euripides. The relationship goes well beyond the intergeneric parody that was common in Old Comedy to the extent that tragic elements become, as one critic has put it, “integral parts of the dramatic structure” of New Comedy.<sup>24</sup> But one could say that it was tragedy that first forged this link with comedy. Several of Euripides’ tragedies—*Alcestis*, *Andromache*, *Children of Heracles*, *Helen*, and *Ion* are among those most frequently mentioned in this context—are generally considered not only to provide models for what would become characteristic plots of New Comedy, but even to incorporate elements that are themselves already comic.<sup>25</sup> Indeed it may be impossible to confine the presence of the comic, at least in Euripidean tragedy, to a few scenes in a few plays. As Bernard Knox has written, “The

disturbance of the heroic atmosphere by realistic scenes which may even verge on the comic is a constant throughout” Euripides’ career.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Decadence and Miscegenation

One way of understanding the process outlined above has to do with entropy. The familiar Aristotelian pattern of rise and fall has been mapped onto many influential histories of antiquity. On this model, the archaic period is generally seen as one of tremendous energy and experimentation that bears fruit in the classical period, which in turn gives way to the irresistible forces of decay in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The traditional reception of classical genre theory works well with this model—in fact, fatally so. The enormous and exemplary status granted to tragedy as a genre coincides with its floruit at the height of the classical period. It is thus very easy to imagine—against the evidence of poetic practice—that tragedy in the fifth century B.C.E. was the simple, well-defined, highly prescriptive genre that Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian genre theory imagined it to be, and that this supposed fact had something to do with the spirit of the age, which recognized the inherent excellence of genres in the purest form.<sup>27</sup> But, over time (the argument goes), whatever qualities had made possible this classical moment become dissipated; and, as one result, the clear system of well-defined genres collapses on itself, producing decadence, hybridism, miscegenation, and murk.

A useful illustration of such thinking arises from the history of theorizing the ancient novel. Aristotle famously remarked that poetry is “more serious and philosophical” than history (*P* 1451b). Otherwise, most ancient theorists barely noticed prose literature at all. In any case, as Daniel Selden has shown, we have no evidence that the category “novel” or “romance” was known to ancient theory.<sup>28</sup> For Renaissance critics like Joseph Scaliger as well, no such genre existed: Homer, Virgil, and Heliodorus were all, for him, representatives of the epic genre.<sup>29</sup> Not until the seventeenth century was a “canon” of ancient “novels” identified and, on this basis, a genre invented. It is impossible to avoid correlating this sudden interest in the ancient novel with the “rise” of the modern novel.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it is certain that from Schiller to Hegel to Lukács to Bakhtin the trope of contrasting epic with novel as a means of illustrating the larger difference between antiquity and the modern period was a staple of modernist self-definition. The presumptive existence of an ancient novel poses something of a problem for this approach. Bakhtin addressed the problem by inscribing the ancient novel teleologically within an ambitious “prehistory of novelistic dis-

course.”<sup>31</sup> Erwin Rhode, the author of the first major study of this literature, took a different tack, regarding the ancient novel not as creatively proto-modern, but as a symptom of decadence. Proof of its decadence was, for Rhode, the fact that it is a demonstrably “impure” genre.<sup>32</sup> The plots of most ancient novels derive in fairly obvious ways from that of the *Odyssey* and share with Homer’s epic not just the motifs of travel and fantastic occurrences, but also an ideal of heroism as a kind of versatility, though in a more bourgeois sense than one finds in Homer. But to this quasi-Homeric matrix may be added elements of historiography; of geographical writing; of Theocritean pastoral, as in Longus’s *Daphnis and Chloe*; of the domestic entanglements characteristic of New Comedy; and of many other elements as well. It is this hybrid nature that, for Rhode as for most students of literature in the late nineteenth century, marked the novel as an impure and thus a decadent genre in comparison with tragedy, which was idealized as a paradigmatically pure genre. The fact that tragedy flourished at Athens, whose citizens prided themselves on their autochthonous origins, during the height of that city’s political and cultural prestige, is not accidental: idealization of literary forms goes hand in hand with idealization of the polis as a locus of social organization and with nineteenth-century attitudes towards ethnicity as well. The novel, on the other hand, seems to have been unknown in the classical polis. Rather it is the product of the Hellenistic world, in which Greekness ceased to be a birthright and became a kind of commodity traded throughout the Mediterranean world under the aegis of Macedonian kings, only to become at length a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Roman empire. Impure genres are the inevitable product of impure societies; and in the rabidly nationalistic environment of the late nineteenth century, such hybrids were not widely admired.

It is of course possible to look at the phenomenon of hybridism in another way. It was a German Latinist, Wilhelm Kroll, who first articulated the idea that the “crossing” of genres was a major aspect of poetic artistry during the Hellenistic and Roman periods.<sup>33</sup> According to Kroll’s way of looking at genre, poets like Apollonius of Rhodes and Virgil inherited from archaic and classical Greek poets formulas for generic purity; but, rather than adhering faithfully to these formulas, they combined or “crossed” them in different ways. Thus Apollonius’s epic on the Argonauts owes a lot to both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but also features a Medea (as well as a Jason) who owes at least as much to Euripidean tragedy. For Virgil this hybrid genre becomes a model in its turn, so that the (if anything) even more Homeric, more epic *Aeneid* owes as much or more to tragedy than does the *Argonautica*. In addition, Virgil exemplifies the practice, largely foreign to poets of the archaic

and classical period, but much more common in Hellenistic and Roman times, of working in different genres.<sup>34</sup> This in itself contributes to a taste for generic hybridization, as when Virgil's representation of contemporary Italy as a pastoral world in which shepherds either go into exile or resign themselves to the encroachments of barbarous soldiers in the *Eclogues* morphs into a story about a primitive Italy in which several communities of pastoral warriors either welcome or resist the arrival of Trojan refugees in the *Aeneid*.<sup>35</sup>

The idea of "mixing" genres, as discussed in Derrida's well-known essay on "the law of genre," is not far from Kroll's "crossing."<sup>36</sup> Such similarities have encouraged classicists to stay abreast of the main currents in contemporary genre-theory. One result of this development has been a persistent dissatisfaction with Kroll's metaphor of "crossing," which is, in fact, biological and positivist in its basic orientation. That is to say that the idea of "crossing" genres as if they were plants retains the notion of generic essentialism that we found in Aristotle and other ancient critics: before you can produce a poem that is a hybrid of epic and tragedy, it seems that you have to have pure specimens of each type.<sup>37</sup> The line taken by Derrida and others, which denies the existence of pure discursive forms, generic or otherwise, has thus put pressure on classicists to reformulate Kroll's metaphor in some other terms. Indeed, the perceived need to do so has arisen as well from practical encounters with ancient literature: when Aristophanes restages scenes from well-known tragedies, with characters named "Euripides" in starring roles; when his colleague Cratinus coins words like *euripidaristophanizein* to describe whatever, in his view, both Aristophanes and Euripides were up to in the field of drama;<sup>38</sup> when Plautus, working in a very different dramatic tradition, coins the term "tragicomic" (*tragicocomoedia*),<sup>39</sup> how can we regard ancient tragedy and comedy as pure genres that do not overlap and even inform one another? Thus there have been a number of attempts to account for the phenomenon that Kroll calls "crossing" in more satisfactory terms.<sup>40</sup> But it may be that, in an age of bioengineering and gene-splicing, Kroll's Mendellian metaphor has life in it yet.

A major factor that argues against jettisoning the concept of generic purity altogether has to do with the peculiar way in which genre is theorized not by ancient critics, but by ancient poets. In general, the practice of Greek and Latin poets was far in advance of what their theoretical counterparts were able to articulate. What is odd is that the same gap between theory and practice that we have seen in the work of Aristotle and others appears in an even more pointed form within the work of the poets themselves. Not only Aristotle, but also Horace is responsible for passing on influential nuggets of classical genre theory to later ages. Horace largely follows Aristotle, but has seemed at least to

some readers to write with a special authority, in that he is not only a theorist but a very accomplished practitioner. It is Horace in his *Ars poetica* who coins the phrase “the law of genre” [*operis lex*] and who represents this law as “forbidding” [*vetet*] the poet to do certain things (line 135). It is he, too, who begins this poem by ridiculing a painter who would graft a human head onto a horse’s body with a fish’s tail and then cover the whole with feathers (lines 1–5). This image is clearly to be taken as analogous to a poem that combines elements from different genres into some monstrous whole, and thus as a forceful statement against any such practice. But Horace’s clear directives regarding generic purity are complicated by the medium in which he delivers them. In the first place, the genre of the *Ars poetica* is a problem in and of itself.<sup>41</sup> To us it looks like a didactic poem; but to make this decision is to assign Horace’s essay on generic fundamentalism to a genre that was, as I have noted, not officially recognized by ancient critics. Not that this was Horace’s first venture into ambiguous territory. The title that the *Ars poetica* bears in our medieval manuscripts is “Letter to the Brothers Piso” (*Epistula ad Pisones*). It is indeed addressed to the Pisones (line 6), even if it does not bear the defining formal marks of a letter, as do at least some of those poems included in the so-called first book *Epistles*. These poems, as verse epistles, are of course themselves an example of generic hybridism, apparently unexampled before Horace. There is also a second book of *Epistles*, but scholars have never been quite sure whether to accept it as something essentially similar to the first book or as something rather different. These poems are longer and are united by their theme, being all literary critical essays. They are addressed to specific individuals (poem 1 to Augustus, poem 2 to Florus), but so are practically all of Horace’s *Odes*, for example, which do not pretend to be letters. Do these essays, then, belong in some sense to the same genre as the *Epistles* of book 1? And, if so, does the “Letter to the Brothers Piso”—that is, the *Ars poetica*—belong with them as well?

One might say that these are secondary issues that may be interesting to the modern reader, but invisible or immaterial to Horace and his contemporaries. But it is at least noteworthy that this text, which insists repeatedly on generic purity, itself obviously transgresses a number of boundaries. We might begin by returning to Aristotle’s judgment on Empedocles: the *Ars poetica*, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and also like Empedocles’ writings, was composed in the epic meter. Is it then, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, a poem or, like the works of Empedocles, merely a versified treatise? Does Horace’s acknowledged status as a lyric poet affect our answer to this question—that is, since Horace (unlike Empedocles, let us say, accepting Aristotle’s judgment for the sake of the argument) has established that he is a poet, does an experiment like the

*Ars poetica* also qualify as a poem, or is Horace a poet when he writes the lyric *Odes* but an essayist when he writes the *Ars*? The question may seem pedantic, but in fact Horace worked throughout his career to raise such questions. In one of his earliest works, commonly called the *Satires* but evidently published under the title *Sermones* or “Conversations,” Horace repeatedly denies that he is writing poetry at all. This does not stop him, however, from constructing a history of the genre in which he is working, one that includes an important Roman predecessor in Lucilius and that points to a Greek origin in the Old Comedy of Eupolis, Cratinus, and Aristophanes—who, he insists, were indeed poets.<sup>42</sup> When, after his success first with the *Epodes* and then with three books of *Odes*, Horace returned to hexameters, he represented himself as an epistolographer, as we have just seen. His *Epistles* share many characteristics with the *Sermones*, including the pretence of not really being poetry; but in terms of genre, they present themselves straightforwardly as letters, taking no notice of their metrical form, leaving it entirely up to the reader to decide what, if anything, this union of poetic and prosaic elements might possibly mean.

Thus when one encounters Horace’s literary epistles, or essays, one realizes that they are hardly Horace’s first forays into generic indeterminacy. And when, in the *Ars poetica*, he comes out in favor of generic purity, it is difficult to take what he says at face value. But the history of literary theory tends to be written from the point of view of explicit theoretical statement, rather than that of the unstated principles that underlie the practice of the poets themselves. This is true even in the case of Horace, whose essay in literary theory is in many respects impossible to reconcile with his practice as a poet. In fact, the principles advocated by the *Ars poetica* as an essay in literary theory are largely at odds with the principles that it exemplifies as a poem; and this is especially true with respect to genre.

Some of the attitudes that are so characteristic of Horace’s weird essay in genre theory are instantiated in the Latin poetry of practically all periods. Stephen Hinds has recently identified one of the defining aspects of Roman generic self-consciousness in connection with the self-fashioning of epic poets from the time of Virgil onwards, an aspect that clearly illustrates the enormous gap between theory and practice in the poetics of genre: “The remarkable thing about appeals to generic essence in Roman critical and metapoetic discussion . . . is their persistence *in the face of* poetic practice. ‘Unepic’ elements, no matter how frequently they feature in actual epics, continue to be regarded as unepic; as if oblivious to elements of vitality and change within the genre (for which he may himself be responsible), each new Roman writer reasserts a stereotype of epic whose endurance is as remarkable as its

ultimate incompatibility with the actual plot of any actual epic in the Greek or Latin canon.<sup>43</sup> Hinds outlines this tendency in terms of classical epic's anxieties about gender. Despite the fundamental importance of female characters to epic poetry from Homer onwards, each successive epicist advertises in ever more strenuous terms the scandal of his introducing major female characters into his epic project. It is not simply that women are theoretically constructed as a constitutive element of epic that serves as a foil to the genre's view of itself as a masculine precinct (which is in itself an accurate view of the matter). The point is that epic poets do not merely work within a constitutive antithesis between male and female as a founding principle of their genre, but that they tendentiously insist that the rules of the genre simply do not allow female characters any scope at all in epic narrative, and that the presence of important female characters in their own epics represents a major instance of trespass.

This example could easily be paralleled by other, equally puzzling (and misleading) statements on the part of Roman poets covering many areas of their activity. What such pronouncements indicate is not merely the gap between ancient theory and ancient practice, but almost the existence of a secret but widely held theory of genre founded on duplicity, indirection, and indeterminacy. The Roman poets were, indeed, demonstrably concerned, even obsessed with genre as a discursive device, probably as much as or more than any other group of poets who ever lived. But their interest in genre as a set of prescriptive rules—which is just about the only way in which they ever articulate their generic self-awareness—is powerfully undermined, even to the point of parody, by an attitude of practical inventiveness and what looks like nothing so much as an interest in the untenability of any position founded on the idea of generic essence. What seems clear, however, is that (for whatever reason), generation after generation found the idea of genre as essence or recipe to be the perfect foil for a poetics that was more concerned with teasing indeterminacy than with purity of any kind.

#### 4. A Case Study: Elegy

As a final illustration of the plasticity with which classical poets handled genre, in contrast to the apparent rigidity and conservatism of their generic self-awareness, I present a thumbnail history of a single genre—Latin love elegy—from cradle to grave. The mere fact that this is possible indicates clearly that genre was a protean concept in ancient poetry; and I could have chosen other genres that would illustrate some of the points I will make with equal clarity.<sup>44</sup> I have chosen to present

elegy instead because it enjoyed a very brief floruit; from the very beginning it was such a “hot” genre and developed so rapidly that in the space of about fifty years its experiments in generic indeterminacy caused it to come apart at the seams.

“Latin love elegy” is a highly overdetermined genre and, as such, is easy to define. As its name implies, its meter is the elegiac couplet.<sup>45</sup> It is presented as the first-person utterance of a character who shares the name of the author. The narrator’s main concern is his relationship with a woman who is probably not Roman or even Italian, but Greek or perhaps even more exotic. She is cultivated, but not wealthy, and thus depends on various admirers for financial support. Her relationship with the narrator is generally turbulent. Not only is he suspicious of rivals, but he is ashamed of his enslavement by a woman below his social rank, and annoyed by the beloved’s frequent demands not only of attention, but of cash and gifts as well. In general, he presents himself as miserable, even incurably so; but he can no longer imagine any other way of life. He normally claims to speak from a position of alterity; and at times he even represents himself as having made an ethical choice involving a rejection of those ways of life that are sanctioned by traditional Roman civic values (an important military and political career, marriage and a family, and so on) and takes advantage of his alternative, elegiac perspective to make himself a social commentator.<sup>46</sup>

It might seem from this detailed description that Latin love elegy must have had an exceptionally long gestation period during which a number of quite disparate sources made their distinctive contributions, and in one sense this is true. Greek poets in the archaic and classical periods had used the elegiac meter in public and private contexts to exhort their fellow citizens to battle, to express political opinions, to commemorate the dead, and to accompany dedications made at holy places. By the Hellenistic period, elegiac epigram had become an important literary form with an expanded range of subjects, love being prominent among them; and elegiac narrative had come into being as well.<sup>47</sup> Latin love elegy draws quite self-consciously on all of these traditions without confining itself to any one of them; but it also owes a lot to other, nonelegiac genres. The stock characters of New Comedy, for example—the wastrel youth, the venal courtesan—are the source of contributions that became emblematic elements of the new genre. Elegy seems as well to have incorporated a strong element of pastoralism, which is most clearly visible in the works of Tibullus.<sup>48</sup> The poets themselves have a lot to say about why they do not write epic, tragedy, or philosophy (whether in prose or verse), and about the antecedents, real or imagined, of their own work. Elegy was, in other words, a hybrid genre if ever there was one.

The ancient canon of elegists as defined by Quintilian began with Cornelius Gallus (d. 27 or 26 B.C.E.), whom he regarded as “rather rough” (*durior*). Gallus’s successor, Albius Tibullus, was Quintilian’s favorite, though he admits that Tibullus’s near-contemporary, Sextus Propertius, had his champions. The last poet in Quintilian’s elegiac canon was Ovid, whom Quintilian regarded as “too frivolous” [*lascivior*].<sup>49</sup> It is easy to see here the standard pattern of rise and fall; but a number of important details surrounding the birth of the genre remain hidden. There is no trace of love elegy as a genre before the mid-first century B.C.E. Already at that time practically all of its ingredients can be found together in the poetry of Catullus (who died or stopped writing probably in about 45 B.C.E.). But Catullus does not present himself as an elegiac poet.<sup>50</sup> Gallus presumably did so, but his poetry, unfortunately, survives only in scraps and testimonia. Tibullus and Propertius, however, appear from the start as fully-formed elegiac poets. Each is hopelessly in love with a demanding mistress. Each bemoans this fate, but nevertheless prefers it to a life of strenuous service and responsibility. Each, moreover, equates his chosen life with the genre of elegy, and insists that, as an elegiac poet, he is simply unable even to think about writing, say, an epic—which he equates with living a life of service and responsibility. It is easy to see how ancient theoretical attitudes towards genre inform this stance. The poet’s genre reflects his character and his way of life. Even the meter in which he expresses himself derives from these facts. But in other respects things do not seem so simple. Tibullus, in what may be his masterpiece, imagines himself as having tried to accompany his patron, the Roman general Marcus Valerius Messalla, on campaign in the east. Predictably, Tibullus is a failure: he falls ill on the island of Corfu, where he must remain until he either gets well or dies. He thus places himself in a perfect elegiac predicament: having demonstrated his incapacity to be of any use, he nevertheless has put a great distance between himself and his mistress Delia, who is either (as he hopes) pining for him or else (he fears) enjoying the attentions of some rival. Imagining his death to be imminent, he composes an epitaph for himself, and so activates one explanation of the origin of his genre.<sup>51</sup> This is an interesting elegiac commonplace: the elegists regularly brood on death, labeling their genre a poetry of lament. Of course, what they normally lament is not anyone’s death, but the fact that they themselves are living out their lives as slaves to love. But because the two notions of “love” and “death” share in the idea of “lament,” they are treated as if they were perfectly compatible, even equivalent, constituents of the genre.

Within this typically elegiac attitude however lurks another typically elegiac idea, namely, that elegy might be very like its opposite, the imperialistic epic—perhaps even to the point that the elegiac subject

position, which is by definition weak and even debilitated, is nevertheless powerful enough to subsume all competing points of view and to convert them into elegiac terms. When Tibullus announces that he is languishing on Corfu, he does so in a very particular way, calling Corfu by the name “Scheria.” This is significant because it is a Homeric reference: Scheria, the imaginary home of Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians in Homer’s *Odyssey*, was identified by ancient scholars with the actual island of Corfu.<sup>52</sup> This Homeric place-name is the only overt allusion to Homer in Tibullus’s poem, but it activates a clever allegory by which Tibullus’s botched journey is converted into a kind of elegiac *Odyssey*, complete with a febrile dream-visit to an eroticized land of the dead and a wishful conflation of Delia with the faithful Penelope.<sup>53</sup> The implicit argument of this poem, which begins with the poet’s hopeless incapacity to live a martial or “epic” sort of life, is that his elegiac life and poetry contains within it everything that is found in Homer anyway.

In a sense, this attitude is as constitutive of elegy as are the other elements listed above. Elegy insists on its difference from other genres, especially epic, but persistently demonstrates its capacity—despite the fact that it is by definition a “lower” and “weaker” genre than epic—to include epic perspectives within itself. This attitude is always implied, and at times it rises to the level of explicit declaration. Propertius, programmatically declaring his refusal to write an epic in honor of Augustus’s exploits as he opens his second books of elegies, declares that it is in their long nights of lovemaking that he and his beloved Cynthia write their *Iliads* (2.1.13–14). Ovid famously takes to its logical conclusion the idea that lovers and soldiers are not opposites, but one and the same thing (a point argued fully and amusingly in *Amores* 1.9).<sup>54</sup>

In keeping with this tendency to absorb its opposite, elegy was always a malleable genre, fully able to refashion itself repeatedly along the lines of quite different genres while always insisting that it remained true to itself. Propertius’s fourth book of elegies is especially notable in this regard. In the programmatic first poem of the book, Propertius announces his intention to forsake elegy and to strike out in new directions. This manifesto is answered and rejected by Horos, an Egyptian priest, who in effect tells the poet, “Once an elegist, always an elegist.” What follows is some of Propertius’s most experimental and genre-bending poetry. It includes an account of a dream in which his mistress Cynthia—surprisingly represented here as already dead and buried—appears to inform Propertius that he cannot get away from her that easily: when he dies, his bones will be gathered from the pyre and buried in the same urn as her own. This image of the *domina* as revenant is a ghastly twist on one of the genre’s defining elements. In another sense, it is a perfectly straightforward example of how elegy constantly

imagines itself as epic: the image of joint burial, and in fact the entire dream sequence, comes straight from a famous episode of the *Iliad* (23.62–107) in which the ghost of Patroclus appears to Achilles. But epic is not the only source of elegy's constant refashioning of itself. Stephen Harrison has shown how Ovid, in the third and final book of his *Amores*, takes the genre in directions that are in various ways at odds with its canonically raffish, counter-cultural pose.<sup>55</sup> Poem 9 is a moving memorial of Tibullus, who died in 19 B.C.E. There is no other such poem in the elegiac corpus. It is true that death is at times an obsessive elegiac concern, even if in rather surprising ways, as we have seen. It is even true that the very idea of elegy as a poetry of lamentation is the basis of one ancient explanation of the genre's origin.<sup>56</sup> Thus Ovid's lament for Tibullus is, in this sense, an "etymological" poem, one that pays tribute to the genre's supposed essence. But for all that, in the third book of the *Amores*, a collection that takes for granted the relationship between elegy and erotic themes, this beautiful embodiment of elegy's essence as a poetry of lament seems strangely *sui generis*, almost even out of place. In a quite different way, poem 13 represents Ovid as attending a religious festival in a provincial town outside Rome. The elegist's sudden interest in folklore connects with Propertius's effort in his final book of elegies to expand the genre in the direction of the etiological poetry of the Hellenistic poet Callimachus of Cyrene, a work written in the elegiac meter but sharing virtually no other generic features with the canonical Roman love elegy.<sup>57</sup> Ovid himself would later take this interest in folklore much farther, as we shall see. The major innovation of this poem, however, is that Ovid is accompanied on his journey to this festival not by his girlfriend Corinna, but by his wife! This is the one and only indication in the elegiac corpus of any wife, marriage (and all that it implies, such as children, a career, solid citizenship, and so forth) being antithetical to the construction of the elegiac persona.

It is for this reason that I earlier spoke of elegy as a genre that ended by "coming apart at the seams." In Ovid's hands elegy becomes a genre of such totalizing ambition that it is impossible to distinguish it with confidence from almost any other literary kind. In fact, creating this impossibility must be regarded as one of Ovid's major ambitions over the larger part of his career. Having established himself as a canonical elegiac poet by writing the *Amores*, he went on to reinvent the genre half a dozen times. First he took it in the direction of didactic poetry—a genre that remained popular with poets despite, or just possibly because of, its near-total lack of recognition by genre theorists—writing an *Ars amatoria* [Art of Love] in which, in effect, he instructs his readers on how to behave like the men and women of elegy. The structure of the work is important: the first two books instruct men on how to get the upper

hand in the battle of the sexes, while the third book effectively undoes this work by giving analogous instruction to women.<sup>58</sup> Ovid then followed this effort with the *Remedia amoris* or “Cure for Love,” another didactic work, this time providing antidotes for elegiac behavior—effectively undoing, therefore, all that had been accomplished in the *Ars*.<sup>59</sup> The chronology of Ovid’s career is not clear in every particular, but it is to roughly this period that we should date another, extraordinarily ambitious work, the *Heroides* [Heroic Women] or *Epistulae Heroidum* [Letters of Heroic Women]. This is a collection of letters, in elegiacs, written by various women of Greek mythology to the men whom they love. The generic diversity of the collection is extreme. In the first place, like Horace’s poetic epistles they are written as letters, and fully explore the possibilities inherent in the form and social role of letters.<sup>60</sup> They are not the first fictional or literary letters in Latin: in fact they draw on a variety of epistolary models, including Horace, probably Cicero, another elegiac experiment in Propertius’s fourth book (poem 3), and so on. But apart from the epistolary form, the range of heroines whom Ovid represents in the collection, most of whom had already led rich and diverse lives in the pages of Greek and Latin literature, involves him in intertextual negotiations with epic, tragedy, comedy, pastoral, lyric, and other genres.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, the letters conform fully to the requirements of the elegiac predicament. The writer suffers from being in love; she can never be cured; only the attention of her beloved offers any hope of relief; the only other option is death; her elegiac subject position dictates her view of the entire world.<sup>62</sup>

Despite their observance of elegiac orthodoxy, however, the *Heroides* depart radically from elegiac protocols in at least this respect: the speaking voice of these poems is gendered feminine. Even in a genre for which the violation of generic rules is itself a rule, this is a major step. Generalization is difficult where so much Latin literature has been lost, but no other genre seems to have undergone this development. The speaking “I” in Latin poetry is regularly gendered masculine. Elegy, which is founded on this principle, nevertheless becomes the first genre to speak as if from a feminine point of view.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, it is elegy that gives us the only surviving poems in classical Latin that were written by a woman, a small cycle transmitted under the name of Tibullus but written by a young woman named Sulpicia.<sup>64</sup> This fact seems entirely characteristic of elegy; the parallelism with Ovid’s interest in the feminine voice may not be accidental. In any case, Ovid’s last elegiac works—those written from the city of Tomis on the shores of the Black Sea, where he had been formally relegated in c.e. 8 by the order of Augustus—once again take up the epistolary form, implicitly in the first collection, the *Tristia* (Sorrows), explicitly in the second, the *Epistulae ex Ponto* (Letters

from the Black Sea). In both collections motifs borrowed from the *Heroides*—the pretense that Ovid, living so far from Rome, is losing his ability to speak and write in Latin; apologies for sending letters stained with his tears—reinforce the idea that the poems we are reading are actual letters while assimilating Ovid to the debased condition of his epistolary heroines.<sup>65</sup> In addition, the collection appeals to well-established elegiac ideas. In the poem that describes the poet's departure from Rome for his Pontic outpost, Ovid parodies Virgil's account of Aeneas's departure from Troy.<sup>66</sup> More generally, the idea of naming the first collection of exile poems the *Tristia* alludes, once again, to the conventional etymology of elegy as a genre of lamentation.

It is ironic that, although the vast majority of Ovid's oeuvre is in elegiacs, he is best known for a poem in the epic meter, his *Metamorphoses*. Latinists once saw it as their duty to explicate the *Metamorphoses* according to the rules of the epic genre.<sup>67</sup> More recently, critics have turned their attention to the fact that Ovid, with a long and inventive elegiac career behind him, at the height of his powers undertook two major projects simultaneously, the epic *Metamorphoses* and the less well-known *Fasti*, which is in elegiacs. Both poems consist of short narratives organized by an overarching framework. In the case of the *Metamorphoses*, the framework is that of a continuous, linear account of mythology from the creation of the world down to the poet's own times. In the case of the *Fasti*, the framework is provided by the circular structure of the Roman civic calendar. In fact, the name of the poem means "calendar," and each of its surviving six books deals with stories connected with important days in each of the first six months of the year.<sup>68</sup> The *Metamorphoses*, as I have noted, is in epic verse, the *Fasti* in elegiacs. There are a few cases in which the two poems tell the same story, and many in which they allude to one another.<sup>69</sup> Where such cross-references and narrative doublets used to be taken as illustrations of the differences between the epic and elegiac genres, critics are now more apt to find evidence of a more complex relationship that explores the boundaries of genre and even questions the meaning of the concept.<sup>70</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

What this rapid survey shows is that the gap between theory and practice in the Greek and Roman discourse on genre is pronounced. In particular, it shows that the "implied theory" instantiated in ancient poetry is far more sophisticated than the explicit theory developed by philosophers and literary critics and apparently espoused by the poets themselves in their manifestoes and programmatic declarations. It is,

however, the explicitly theoretical tradition, exclusively I would say, that has played a role in our modern histories of genre theory. There is no point in deploring this situation, which is now a historical fact. On the other hand, I hope to have shown that the discourse on genre that is now such an important part of classical studies is far more open than ancient genre theory might have led one to expect. This is so because that discourse is based less on the work of the ancient theoreticians than it is on the vastly more complex and interesting practice of the ancient poets. The most important point I can make in closing is to urge that the implicit theory of genre embedded within Greek and Roman literature come to play a significant role in any future attempt to assess the history of discourse about genre.

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## NOTES

1 See for instance the entry on “Genre” by Glenn Most and Gian Biagio Conte in Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth, ed., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3d ed. (Oxford, 1996), pp. 630–31. For an excellent recent survey of contemporary approaches to genre within classical studies, see the essays in Mary Depew and Dirk Obbink, ed., *Matrices of Genre: Authors, Canons, and Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

2 For the development of these arguments within the context of the ancient biographical tradition, see Joseph Farrell, “Greek Lives and Roman Careers in the Classical Vita Tradition,” in *Literary and Artistic Careers from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Fred de Armas and Patrick Cheney (Toronto, 2002), pp. 25–46.

3 At the end of the *Symposium* (223d), Socrates is reported to have argued that it was in fact possible for the same man to write both tragedy and comedy. But in view of the fact that he is portrayed there as, in effect, dueling with unarmed men (since his interlocutors, drunk and sleep-deprived, are unequal to the demands of rigorous dialectic), it seems likely that the argument was intended as a joke at his friends’ expense.

4 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1448b. All subsequent references to the *Poetics* in this essay are to the edition by W. Rhys Roberts, *Aristotle: The Poetics, “Longinus”: On the Sublime, Demetrius On Style*, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1927); hereafter cited in text as *P*.

5 The various critical approaches to the epic genre that were current in antiquity are surveyed by Severin Koster, *Antike Epos theorien* (Wiesbaden, 1970).

6 Modern critics as a result are hard put to come up with a satisfactory definition of ancient didactic poetry. For two recent efforts, neither wholly successful, see Alexander Dalzell, *The Criticism of Didactic Poetry: Essays on Lucretius, Virgil, and Ovid* (Toronto, 1996) and Katherina Volk, *The Poetics of Latin Didactic: Lucretius, Virgil, Ovid, Manilius* (Oxford, 2002). Servius in his commentary on Virgil’s *Georgics* (*Servii Grammatici qui feruntur in Virgilio Bucolica et Georgica Commentarii*, ed. Thilo and Hagen [Leipzig, 1887], 129, lines 9–10) is exceptional in using the word *didascalici* (didactic) to describe the poem. The general failure of ancient critics to recognize didactic poetry as a genre may derive in part from the idea that all poetry was concerned with teaching, on some level or another. The idea is subjected to a withering critique in the Platonic dialogue *Crito*, but this critique had little effect on subsequent theoretical speculation in antiquity. In the *Republic* Plato himself regards poetry as a crucial vehicle for teaching the youth of his ideal city, although the

lessons that he wants them to learn have to do with, again, the formation of character rather than the more utilitarian kinds of instruction considered in the *Crito*.

7 On Homer and Ennius see Lucretius 1.102–35.

8 On the generic relationships involved here Ralph M. Rosen, *Old Comedy and the Iambographic Tradition*, American Classical Studies, 19 (Atlanta, 1988) is fundamental. The “Old Comedy” of Eupolis, Cratinus, and Aristophanes (middle to late fifth century B.C.E.) is distinguished from the “New Comedy” of Menander and his contemporaries (fourth century B.C.E.) by a variety of criteria, including favorite themes, characteristic plots, treatment of the chorus, and so on.

9 Aristotle’s terseness on this point leaves certain questions unanswered. Although in this same passage he deplores “people [who] attach the word poet to the name of the metre and speak of elegiac poets and of others as epic poets [and] thus they do not call them poets in virtue of their representation but apply the name indiscriminately in virtue of the metre,” his statement that Empedocles has nothing in common with Homer except meter does not actually specify that Empedocles fails to qualify as an epic poet on grounds of character—a position that the surviving fragments of Empedocles’ work and his later reputation would in fact do little to support. It seems likely that it is Empedocles’ subject matter that prevents Aristotle from recognizing him as a poet, but Aristotle does not say enough on this point to permit further discussion. To confuse matters a bit further, Aristotle’s opinion that Empedocles is not in fact a poet does not prevent him from later citing Empedocles’ use of metaphor as exemplary (1457b; see also 1461a and, for contrasting opinions about Empedocles, *Rhetoric* 1373b and 1407a).

10 This point is important, because genre theory might have been subjected to the same sort of critique that Plato mounts in his later dialogues against his own theory of forms. But it never did happen, and mainstream critical opinion with regard to genres remained quite rigid.

11 In general there exists a very pronounced tendency on the part of ancient critics to take the words of poets at face value and thus to convert a complex and highly argumentative essay in self-fashioning into a simple, prescriptive rule. This tendency has been studied very fully in connection with the ancient biographical tradition (Mary Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Greek Poets*, [Baltimore, 1981]; Farrell, “Greek Lives and Roman Careers”). In any case, we should certainly not think of poets as parroting the independently articulated pronouncements about genre that they found in theoreticians and critics, but of a much more circular process whereby poets and critics borrow freely from, and frequently distort, one another.

12 Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 2.1

13 See Horace, *Odes* 1.6; R. G. M. Nisbet and Margaret Hubbard, *A Commentary on Horace, Odes, Book 1* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 80–90; David West, *Horace, Odes 1: Carpe Diem* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 27–31.

14 Already in Horace’s first collection of *Odes* poem 12 begins with a Pindaric “motto” borrowed from *Olympian* 2. In the fourth book of *Odes*, which was published at least six or seven years after the first three books were assembled into a unified corpus, Pindar, together with other poets who represent the more “exalted” strains of lyric, becomes a major theme (announced as if apotropaically in poem 2; cf. *Odes* 4.9.6 and *Epistles* 1.3.10).

15 Pindar, *Pythian Ode* 2.49–56

16 On this passage and on archaic genre theory in general, Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 222–28, is fundamental.

17 Nigel Nicholson, “Mixed Praise: Sexual Imagery, Truth and Discord in Pindar’s *Odes*,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1994).

18 On Sappho see Leah Rissman, *Love as War: Homeric Allusion in the Poetry of Sappho*, (Königstein, 1983); on Hipponax, see Ralph M. Rosen, “Hipponax and the Homeric

Odysseus," *Eikasmos*, 1 (1990), 1–12, and his "A Poetic Initiation Scene in Hipponax?" *American Journal of Philology*, 109 (1988), 174–79.

19 Peter Rau, *Paratragodia: Untersuchung einer komischen Form des Aristophanes* (München, 1967); M. Silk, "Aristophanic Paratragedy," in Alan Sommerstein, ed., *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis* (Bari, 1993), pp. 477–504.

20 Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 499–500. The word is coined from *trugôdês* (lees, dregs). See Oliver Taplin, "Tragedy and Tragedy," *Classical Quarterly*, 33 (1983), 331–33.

21 In the *Frogs*, Dionysus, god of the theater, descends to the underworld where he holds a contest between Aeschylus and Euripides to decide which of them he will take with him back to the land of the living. Euripides also appears in the *Acharnians* and, with Agathon, in *Thesmophoriazusaë*.

22 For instance, Aeschylus's Theban tetralogy included three tragedies (the lost *Laeus* and *Oedipus* together with the surviving *Seven against Thebes*), which dramatized the disasters that befell the house of Labdacus over three successive generations, and one satyr play (also lost), the *Sphinx*, which made light of a central episode in this saga. On satyr dramas in general see Dana F. Sutton, "The Satyr Play," in P. E. Easterling and B. M. W. Knox, ed., *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. 1, *Greek Literature* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 346–54.

23 See Gregory W. Dobrov, *Figures of Play: Greek Drama and Metafictional Poetics* (Oxford, 2001).

24 Sander M. Goldberg, *The Making of Menander's Comedy* (London, 1980), p. 17. See also S. Katsouris, *Tragic Patterns in Menander* (Athens, 1975) and R. L. Hunter, *The New Comedy of Greece and Rome* (Cambridge, 1985), ch. 5, "Comedy and Tragedy," pp. 114–51.

25 See Hazel E. Barnes, "Greek Tragicomedy," *Classical Journal*, 60 (1964), 125–31. Francis M. Dunn, "Comic and Tragic License in Euripides' *Orestes*," *Classical Antiquity*, 8 (1989), 238–51 develops a suggestion of Barnes's that the *Orestes* also incorporates significant comic elements. Dunn further considers the role of comedy in Euripides in *Tragedy's End: Closure and Innovation in Euripidean Drama* (New York, 1996).

26 B. M. W. Knox, "Euripides," in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. 1 (Cambridge 1982), p. 318.

27 For an extremely clear-headed account of how tragedy came to be seen as the ideal genre, with a forceful critique of that point-of-view, see Glenn W. Most, "Generating Genres: The Idea of the Tragic," in Depew and Obbink, *Matrices of Genre*, pp. 15–35.

28 Daniel Selden, "Genre of Genre," in James Tatum, ed., *The Search for the Ancient Novel* (Baltimore, 1994), p. 57 n. 81.

29 J. C. Scaliger, *Poetices libri septem* (Lyon, 1561), 144d.

30 I allude to the title of Ian Watt's celebrated work *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley, 1957). I do not mean by this that I accept without reservation his account of the novel, particularly as regards the relationship between ancient and modern prose fiction. In some ways the best account of the ancient novel in relation to the modern remains Arthur Heiserman, *The Novel before the Novel: Essays and Discussions about the Beginnings of Prose Fiction in the West* (Chicago, 1977).

31 See Bakhtin's essay "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), pp. 41–83.

32 Erwin Rhode, *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer* (Leipzig, 1876). More or less the same opinion was expressed almost a hundred years later by Otto Weinreich, *Die Abenteuer der schönen Charikleia* (Zurich, 1970), p. 340.

33 Wilhelm Kroll, *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur* (Stuttgart, 1924), ch. 9, "Die Kreuzung der Gattungen," pp. 202–24. For a superb effort to situate Kroll's work within the cultural discontents of early twentieth-century *Mittleuropa*, see Alessandro

Barchiesi, "The Crossing," *Texts, Ideas, and the Classics: Scholarship, Theory, and Classical Literature*, ed. S. J. Harrison (Oxford, 2001), pp. 142–63.

34 On Virgil's career see most recently Elena Theodorakopoulos, "Closure: The Book of Virgil," in Charles Martindale, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 155–65. On the role of genres in shaping the idea of a poetic career in antiquity, see Farrell, "Greek Lives and Roman Careers."

35 On this aspect of generic hybridity in Virgil, see Farrell, "The Virgilian Intertext," in Martindale, *Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, pp. 222–38.

36 Jacques Derrida, "La loi du genre / The Law of Genre," *Glyph*, 7 (1980), 176–232.

37 This point is usefully discussed by Alessandro Barchiesi, "The Crossing," *Texts, Ideas, and the Classics: Scholarship, Theory, and Classical Literature*, ed. S. J. Harrison (Oxford, 2001), pp. 142–63.

38 Fr. 307 in the edition of Rudolf Kassel and Colin Austin, *Poetae Comici Graeci* (New York, 1983).

39 *Amphitruo* 59, 63. If the word is borrowed from a Greek source, the source has been lost.

40 For "crossing" reimagined as Bakhtinian "dialogue" see Joseph Farrell, "Dialogue of Genres on Ovid's 'Lovesong of Polyphemus' (*Metamorphoses* 13.719–897)," *American Journal of Philology*, 113 (1992), 235–68.

41 One of the more ambitious and iconoclastic essays on the genre of this poem is Bernard Frischer, *Shifting Paradigms: New Approaches to Horace's Ars poetica* (Atlanta, 1991).

42 Poem 1.4 in particular is crucial for these points. Horace's identification of Old Comedy as the generic ancestor of his satires is extremely interesting. In the first place, comedy and satire have practically no formal features in common. In the second, Horace emphatically points out that the three writers whose work he takes as defining Old Comedy were "poets" [*poetae*], while he denies that Roman satire, whether Lucilius's or his own, is in fact poetry. He does point to an ethical concern that the two genres share, namely that of identifying and so of chastizing or correcting misbehavior. To this extent, his position on the generic status of satire can be shoehorned into an Aristotelian frame of reference, thanks largely to the sketchiness of Aristotle's theory of genre. But to most students, Horace seems to be playing a sophisticated game with an underdeveloped theory rather than trying to stay within any clear generic boundaries.

43 Stephen Hinds, "Epic Essentialism from Macer to Statius," in Mary Depew and Dirk Obbink, ed., *Matrices of Genre*, pp. 222–23.

44 Satire, for example, was the one genre that the Romans felt they had actually invented (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 10.93), notwithstanding the genealogy sketched by Horace in *Sermones* 1.4 (note 42 above).

45 This meter consists of a dactylic hexameter catalectic (odd-numbered lines) followed by a shorter line consisting of a double "hemiepes" (a word that denotes the first half of a dactylic hexameter), which was conventionally (if erroneously) understood as a pentameter. As such the elegiac couplet is a close cousin of the epic meter, but in Roman elegiac poetry the relationship between the two genres is represented as antithetical, the shorter and "weaker" pentameter line undermining the martial quality of the hexameter that precedes it.

46 On the basic elements of Latin love elegy, see the relevant chapters in R. O. A. M. Lyne, *The Latin Love Poets from Catullus to Horace* (Oxford, 1980). For a penetrating analysis of the genre's discursive structure see Duncan F. Kennedy, *The Arts of Love: Five Studies in the Discourse of Roman Love Elegy* (Cambridge, 1993).

47 On the diverse kinds of Greek poetry that used the elegiac meter see M. L. West, "Elegiac poetry, Greek," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, pp. 517–18.

48 On the possibility that pastoral elements were already present in the (now lost) works of the earliest Roman elegist, Cornelius Gallus, see David O. Ross, Jr., *Backgrounds to*

*Augustan Poetry: Gallus, Elegy, and Rome* (Cambridge, 1975), index under "Gallus, pastoral elements in."

49 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 10.93.

50 Catullus's characteristic meter was the hendecasyllable, though he wrote in a number of other forms, including the elegiac couplet. David Ross, in *Style and Tradition in Catullus* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), has identified two very distinct elegiac styles in Catullus's poetry, one based on the practice of Hellenistic Greek poets, the other on a tradition of epigram that has important Roman antecedents. Curiously, the one poem of Catullus that most clearly anticipates the fully developed love elegy (poem 68) has closer affinities of diction and prosody with the epigrammatic tradition, whereas the elegies of Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid are notably Hellenistic in their aesthetic orientation.

51 On this tradition see M. L. West, *Studies in Greek Elegy and Iambus* (Berlin, 1974), pp. 4–5. See further note 56 below.

52 Thucydides 1.25, Pliny, *Natural History* 4.52.

53 See David F. Bright, *Haec mihi fingebam: Tibullus in his World* (Leiden, 1978), ch. 2, "The Anti-hero," pp. 16–37.

54 On the conceit of "the lover's soldiery" see Elizabeth Thomas, "Variations on Military Themes in Ovid's *Amores*," *Greece & Rome*, 11 (1964), 151–65; Paul Murgatroyd, "Militia amoris and the Roman Elegists," *Latomus*, 34 (1975), 59–79.

55 See Stephen Harrison, "Ovid and Genre: The Evolutions of an Elegist," in Philip Hardie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 81–82.

56 The connection between elegy and pity (in Greek *éleos*) or the pitiable (*eleinón*), or with the onomatopoeic "to say 'woe, woe'" (*è è légein*), or to pronounce a eulogy, literally "to speak well" of someone (*eu légein*), is made by an ancient reference work entitled "The Great Etymology" (*Etymologium Magnum* 326.48). The connection between elegy and lamentation is frequently mentioned by Roman poets: see for instance Horace at *Ars poetica* 75 on *querimonia*, "lament."

57 On this aspect see John F. Miller, "Callimachus and the Augustan Aetiological Elegy," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II, 30.1 (Berlin, 1982) 371–417.

58 The poem makes this point explicitly at the opening of book 3.

59 Gian Biagio Conte, *Genres and Readers: Lucretius, Love Elegy, Pliny's Encyclopedia* (Baltimore, 1994), ch. 2, "Love without Elegy: The *Remedia Amoris* and the Logic of a Genre," pp. 35–65.

60 On the *Heroides* as letters, see Duncan Kennedy, "The Epistolary Mode and the first of Ovid's *Heroides*," *Classical Quarterly*, 34 (1984), 413–22; E. A. Kirfel, *Untersuchungen zur Briefform der Heroides Ovids* (Bern, 1969).

61 Though dated, the best survey of the entire collection from this point of view remains Howard Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides* (Princeton, 1974).

62 The elegiac character of the *Heroides* is fully explored by Ferdinand Spoth, *Ovids Heroides als Elegien* (München, 1992).

63 Tibullus's elegies are presented entirely from the lover's point of view, but Propertius occasionally makes Cynthia a speaking character (1.3, 3.6, 4.3) and, in his fourth book, experiments with a number of ways of representing the female voice. There is of course a considerable spectrum of opinion on how these representations signify. Some scholars on the basis of such phenomena as this consider elegy a relatively feminized genre. At the opposite extreme are those who condemn the practice of ventriloquizing various female characters on the part of these male poets.

64 The poems are transmitted along with others wrongly ascribed to Tibullus in what is now called the *appendix Tibulliana*. Texts by and about Sulpicia are variously numbered as poems 8–20 of book 3 or as 2–14 of book 4. There has never been universal agreement as to which texts are by Sulpicia herself or indeed whether any of them really are what they

appear to be, that is, first-person love poetry written by a young woman. See now Mathilde Skoie, *Reading Sulpicia: Commentaries 1475–1990* (Oxford, 2002), who shows that it is impossible to interpret Sulpicia without reference to the history of her reception.

65 See Joseph Farrell, "Reading and Writing the *Heroides*," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 98 (1998), 307–38; Harrison, "Ovid and Genre," 89–92.

66 See Samuel J. Huskey, "Ovid and the Fall of Troy in *Tristia* 1.3," *Vergilius*, 48 (2002), 88–104.

67 The classic effort in this vein, still worth reading, is Richard Heinze, "Ovids elegische Erzählung," *Berichte der Sächsischen Akademie zu Leipzig, Philologische-historische Klasse*, 71.7 (Leipzig, 1919), rpt. in *Vom Geist der Römertums*, ed. E. Burck, 3d ed. (Stuttgart, 1960). For a strong critique of Heinze's approach, see D. A. Little, "Richard Heinze: *Ovids elegische Erzählung*," in *Ovids Ars amatoria und Remedia amoris: Untersuchungen zur Aufbau* (Stuttgart, 1970), pp. 64–105.

68 Ovid at many points in the *Fasti* states his intention to devote one book of the poem to each of the twelve months, but there is no hard evidence that he ever got beyond June. On the question of whether the six books that we have are merely half of an incomplete twelve-book design or were revised to form a "complete fragment" see Alessandro Barchiesi, "Endgames," in *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*, ed. Deborah H. Roberts, Francis M. Dunn, and Don Fowler (Princeton, 1997), pp. 181–208.

69 The most extensive of these is the abduction of Persephone (*Met.* 5.341–661, *Fast.* 4.393–620), which formed the main subject of Heinze's inquiry. See also the following note.

70 Peter E. Knox, *Ovid's Metamorphoses and the Traditions of Augustan Poetry* (Cambridge, 1986), takes the position that conventional generic categories do not apply to Augustan poetry and argues that *Metamorphoses* has stronger affinities to elegy than to epic. Stephen Hinds, *The Metamorphosis of Persephone: Ovid and the Self-conscious Muse* (Cambridge, 1987) revisits Heinze's examination of epic and elegiac narrative. Hinds's "Essential Epic" continues this line of argument, stating that "the poem's generic self-consciousness is expressed and negotiated not just in its observance but also in its creative transgression of the expected bounds of epic" (Stephen Hinds, "Essential Epic from Macer to Ovid," *Matrices of Genre* [Cambridge, Mass. 2001], p. 222).