

ADRIAN S. HOLLIS

THE REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE OF CHOERILUS OF SAMOS

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 130 (2000) 13–15

© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn

THE REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE OF CHOERILUS OF SAMOS

Commenting on the distinction in Plato, Phaedrus 245 a 5–8 between poets inspired by *μανία*¹ and those who relied on *τέχνη*, the fifth-century neo-Platonist Hermias (112, p. 98, 28–30 ed. P. Couvreur, 1901) writes *τί γὰρ ὅμοιον ἢ Χοιρίλου καὶ Καλλιμάχου ποιήσεις πρὸς τὴν Ὀμήρου ἢ Πινδάρου*; The general view² seems to be that Hermias refers to Choerilus of Iasus, the court poet of Alexander the Great, ‘*incultis qui versibus et male natis / rettulit acceptos, regale nomisma, Philippos*’ (Horace, Epist. 2,1, 233–234). Yet the resulting situation is paradoxical: a strong candidate for the title of worst of all poets³ represents poetic *τέχνη* in conjunction with the master craftsman Callimachus⁴. To be a poet of *τέχνη* was hardly the ultimate condemnation, and did not preclude immortal, world-wide fame – at least in Ovid’s judgment of Callimachus⁵ (Amores 1, 15, 13–14) ‘*Battiades semper toto cantabitur orbe: / quamvis ingenio non valet⁶, arte valet*’.

It seems to me much more likely that Hermias⁷ had in mind Choerilus of Samos⁸. The elder Choerilus flourished about 400 B.C., and originated the genre of Greek historical epic by writing on Xerxes’ invasion of Greece. There is some evidence (Suppl. Hell. 328) of a debate in the fourth and third centuries B.C. over the relative merits of Choerilus of Samos and Antimachus of Colophon; the former’s poetry was still current about A.D. 200, as we discover from a (puzzling) papyrus containing titles of his works (P. Oxy. 1399 = Suppl. Hell. 314). It is hard for us to judge Choerilus on the little which survives, but comments have not been unfavourable – George Huxley spoke of ‘the originality of his manner’⁹, and Martin West¹⁰ saw ‘skill and originality’ in the fragments.

We may feel (without any need to disparage his ‘ingenium’) that the choice of Callimachus to represent poetic *τέχνη* is entirely just. But this choice probably owed less to subjective evaluation than to the poet’s own statement, prominently in the Aetia prologue, *ἀὐθι δὲ τέχνηι / κρίνετε . . . τὴν σοφίην* (fr. 1, 17–18). Even among the scanty remains of Choerilus we can perhaps find a reason why Choerilus should have been chosen to partner Callimachus in Hermias’ comparison. In Suppl. Hell. 317

¹ The Latin equivalent would be ‘*furor*’ (OLD 1 (b)), as in Statius, *Silvae* 2,7,76 ‘*docti furor arduus Lucreti*’, where the juxtaposition of ‘*docti*’ and ‘*furor*’ perhaps suggests that Lucretius excelled in *ars* no less than *ingenium* (cf. Cicero, *Ad Quintum fratrem* 2,9,4 ‘*multis luminibus ingeni, multae tamen artis*’).

² E.g. C. Brink on Horace, *Ars Poetica* 357, or Supplementum Hellenisticum 333. Brink is perhaps uneasy, since he goes on to quote as ‘even more relevant’ a passage of Philodemus which does undoubtedly refer to Choerilus of Iasus, linking him with Anaximenes of Lampsacus (SH 45, another panegyrist of Alexander) as bad poets contrasted with Homer.

³ In Curtius Rufus 8,5,8 Agis of Argos (Suppl. Hell. 17) is described as ‘*pessimorum carminum post Choerilum conditor*’.

⁴ Professor R. Kassel in *Rh. M.* 112, 1969, 100 = *Kl. Schr.* p. 374, noted the absence of this testimonium from Pfeiffer’s edition of Callimachus.

⁵ Perhaps deliberately contradicting the statement of Plato (Phaedrus 245 a, 7–8) that *ἡ ποίησις ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν μαινομένων ἢ τοῦ σωφρονοῦντος ἠφανίσθη*.

⁶ The negative part of this assessment may derive from Call. fr. 1, 19–20 *μηδ’ ἄπ’ ἐμεῦ διφῶτε μέγα ψοφέουσιν ἀοιδὴν / τίκτεσθαί* – although Callimachus himself was surely not disclaiming *ingenium* with these words.

⁷ Or his ultimate source; testimonia (e.g. the Suda entry reproduced as Suppl. Hell. 315) regularly confuse the two Choerili, and Hermias may have been no better informed.

⁸ This possibility is at least considered by P. Radici Colace, *Choerili Samii Reliquiae*, Messina, 1979, who prints Hermias on Plato, Phaedrus 245 a as his Test. Dub. 2 (p.5), followed by A. Bernabé, *Poetae Epici Graeci Pars I*, Leipzig, 1988, p. 190, as Choerilus Samius Test. 13 dub. (without discussion).

⁹ GRBS 10, 1969, 12.

¹⁰ OCD³, 1996, p. 323. In CR NS 16, 1966, 23, West suggests that P. Oxy. 2524 (vol. 30, 1964) may be by Choerilus. This idea was taken up by Radici Colace (frs. 14 a – 21) and Bernabé (frs. 13 a – 20), but did not appeal to the editors of Suppl. Hell. (p. 432, on SH 935).

(which could stand at or near the beginning of a poem)¹¹ Choerilus bewails his position as an epic poet born too late in time:

ἄ μάκαρ, ὅστις ἔην κείνον χρόνον ἴδρις ἀοιδῆς,
 Μουσάων θεράπων, ὅτ' ἀκήρατος ἦν ἔτι λειμών·
 νῦν δ' ὅτε πάντα δέδασται, ἔχουσι δὲ πείρατα τέχνη,
 ὕστατοι ὥστε δρόμου καταλειπόμεθ', οὐδέ πη ἔστι
 πάντη παπταίνοντα νεοζυγὲς ἄρμα πελάσσαι.

When he says (line 3) that τέχνη (poetic skills) have come to their limits, presumably he includes himself among the possessors of τέχνη. Although the case is not as clear as with Callimachus (above), I would not be surprised if this passage played a major part in the selection of Choerilus to represent τέχνη.

SH 314 (above) shows that Choerilus was of interest to Greeks in the third century A.D. Did he make any impression on the Romans? The Samian is never named in Latin poetry, but consider first Propertius 3,1, 13–14, addressed to fellow poets:

quid frustra missis in me certatis habenis?
 non datur ad Musas currere lata via.

The pentameter obviously picks up Callimachus fr. 1, 27 μηδ' οἶμον ἀνὰ πλατύν. But there is a striking difference. Propertius, unlike Callimachus, is engaged in a race with his rivals¹²; the connection of thought between lines 13 and 14 must be that Propertius leads the race on a track which is too narrow to allow overtaking. This looks very much like a deliberate reversal of SH 317, 4–5 in which Choerilus, as the backmarker, can find no vacant space amid the solid array of competitors ahead of him.

In the recusationes of Augustan poets we commonly find lists of epic themes which the author declines to handle; these may start with the wars of Olympian gods against Titans or Giants, and end with the triumphs of Augustus. Within such a catalogue, a small but significant part is played by Greek historical epic on the Persian Wars. Thus Propertius 2, 1, 22 'Xerxis et imperio bina coisse vada'. More fully, Manilius 3, 19–21:

nec Persica bella profundo
 indicta et magna pontum sub classe latentem
 inmissumque fretum terris, iter aequoris undis;

and [Virgil], Culex 30–34¹³:

urit Ericthonias Oriens non ignibus arces,
 non perfossus Athos nec magno vincula ponto
 iacta meo quaerent iam sera volumine famam,
 non Hellespontus pedibus pulsatus equorum
 Graecia cum timuit venientis undique Persas.

It seems likely that these passages are an acknowledgement of Choerilus' Persica.

Herodotus (7, 61–99) shows that Choerilus would have a rich opportunity in the catalogue of diverse national contingents which formed Xerxes' army of invasion. The historian is interested in their dress, weapons and unusual methods of fighting – e.g. that of the nomadic Sagartii who lasso their enemies from horseback (7, 85). Evidence survives in SH 318–320 that such a catalogue formed a colourful and attractive part of the epic. SH 320 is very elaborate:

τῶν δ' ὅπιθεν διέβαινε γένος θαυμαστὸν ἰδέσθαι,
 γλῶσσαν μὲν Φοίνισσαν ἀπὸ στομάτων ἀφιέντες,
 ὠϊκεὸν δ' ἐν Σολύμοις ὄρεσι πλατέτη παρὰ λίμνη,

¹¹ SH 316 might have preceded at a short interval.

¹² Somewhat confusingly, it must be said, since one would gather from the two previous couplets (9–12) that the other poets were following on foot behind Propertius' triumphal chariot.

¹³ Addressed to 'Octavi venerande' (line 25), the poem is clearly not by the young Virgil, but may well have been written in the Augustan period.

ἀρχμαλέοι κορυφάς, τροχοκουράδες, αὐτὰρ ὑπερθεν
ἵππων δαρτὰ πρόσωπ' ἐφόρευν ἐσκληκότα καπνώι.¹⁴

This fragment goes far beyond the typical components of the Homeric catalogues. The same applies to Virgil's catalogues (Aeneid 7, 647–817 and 10, 166–212) and it is noteworthy that Virgil's interests are similar to those of Herodotus – clothing and armour, unusual weapons and methods of fighting¹⁵. Choerilus may be a significant influence, although Virgil no doubt had available to him catalogues from lost Hellenistic epic¹⁶.

Knowledge of Choerilus at Rome may even have extended to the Flavian period. Thanks to Aristotle¹⁷ we probably possess the opening words¹⁸ of Choerilus' Persica (SH 316):

ἤγεό μοι λόγον ἄλλον, ὅπως Ἀσίης ἀπὸ γαίης
ἦλθεν ἐς Εὐρώπην πόλεμος μέγας.

I suspect that there may be a deliberate echo of this opening in Valerius Flaccus 5, 217–218:

incipi nunc cantus alios, dea, visaque vobis
Thessalici da bella ducis.

Subject matter makes the link appropriate, since the fighting which is prepared in Val. Flacc. 5, and which occupies book 6, shows the same kind of interest in e.g. exotic clothing and armour, unusual weapons, and methods of fighting¹⁹ as, to judge from Herodotus, we would expect to find in Choerilus, and do indeed find in Suppl. Hell. 320 (above).

Finally, a much more speculative suggestion of Choerilus' influence upon Virgil. Sinon tells the Trojans that, if they take the wooden horse into Troy, 'ultro Asiam magno Pelopea ad moenia bello / venturam, et nostros ea fata manere nepotes' (Aeneid 2, 193–194). R. G. Austin²⁰ describes this as a 'glittering prophecy', but seems to take it as entirely vacuous ('[Sinon] has not made one false step'). On the other hand prophecies about 'nepotes' in the Aeneid are solemn, and we expect them to be fulfilled, e.g. Dido's curse in Aen. 4, 629 'pugnent ipsique nepotesque', and 3, 505 'maneat nostros ea cura nepotes'²¹. The true fulfilment of Sinon's prophecy²² came in the second century B.C.: Roman victories over the Greeks were paradoxically a triumph of East over West rather than vice versa. But the episode of Sinon contains layer upon layer of deceit. A reader of Aeneid 2, 193–194 might naturally think first of the Persian invasions of Greece in the fifth century B.C.²³, and perhaps Virgil has reinforced this delusive idea by hinting at the first lines of Choerilus' Persica, ὅπως Ἀσίης ἀπὸ γαίης / ἦλθεν ἐς Εὐρώπην πόλεμος μέγας. 'Asiam' could suggest Ἀσίης . . . γαίης, 'magno . . . bello' πόλεμος μέγας and 'Pelopea ad moenia . . . / venturam' ἦλθεν ἐς Εὐρώπην²⁴.

Keble College, Oxford

Adrian S. Hollis

¹⁴ For such use of horses' heads, cf. Hdt. 7, 70. P. Radici Colace believed that Nonnus, Dionysiaca 26, 341–349 may depend on Choerilus. But F. Vian in the Budé Nonnus, vol. 9 p. 291 (on 26, 343–349) is sceptical.

¹⁵ E.g. Aen. 7, 664 dolones, 730 aclydes, 741 Teutonico ritu soliti torquere cateias. Some of the words (and objects referred to) puzzled the ancients as much as they do us.

¹⁶ E.g. the works of Rhianus, not to mention the ill-starred poets of Alexander the Great.

¹⁷ Rhet. 3, 14, 4; 1415 a 11 (p. 182 Kassel).

¹⁸ The argument is strong, since Aristotle quotes also the first line of the Iliad and of the Odyssey. But I feel some sympathy for the view (e.g. Huxley, GRBS 10, 1969, 16) that at least one line stood before ἤγεό μοι, since otherwise the required vocative is postponed unexpectedly far. One could imagine e.g. '<Muse who told of Troy's destruction>' / ἤγεό μοι λόγον ἄλλον κτλ.

¹⁹ E.g. Val. Flacc. 6, 132–133, on capturing enemies with a lasso (cf. Herodotus 7, 85).

²⁰ In his Oxford, 1964, edition of Aeneid II, p. 93.

²¹ The motif may derive from Apollonius Rhodius 4, 1745 τεοῖς νεπόδεσσιν ἐτοίμη (note that νέπους and nepos are etymologically cognate).

²² As seen by e.g. R. D. Williams in his 1972 edition of Aeneid I–VI, p. 228.

²³ Of course the Persian invasions were ultimately unsuccessful, and so not a complete revenge for the Trojan War.

²⁴ I am grateful to Dr. Martin West for comments on a first draft of this article.