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Didactic poetry: The Hellenistic invention of a pre-existing genre

For all that it is almost a cliché that Hellenistic poets were acutely aware of genre—who before Callimachus would or could have boasted of his πολυειδεια?—,¹ discussions, let alone definitions, of didactic poetry as a genre are scarce. Why bother, when it seems so obvious? Look at Aratus and Nicander, whose model was Hesiod, and nothing more need be said. Nonetheless, that will be my aim here. There have of course been many useful studies of classical didactic poetry,² some of which offer various classifications (see below); yet I have long felt that insufficient attention has been paid, both by the ancients themselves and by us today, to the *development* of the poems called didactic, although modern terminology and the ancients are not in complete agreement as to what constitutes a

Bibliography at end.

1 Some earlier poets did in fact write in more than one genre, but could have boasted of it only in particular terms, i. e., by specifying “I write poems of type X and Y,” as we see at the end of the *Symposium* 223d ὁμολογεῖν αὐτοὺς τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀνδρὸς εἶναι κωμωδίαν καὶ τραγωδίαν ἐπίστασθαι ποιεῖν, καὶ τὸν τέχνη τραγωδοποιῶν ὄντα <καὶ> κωμωδοποιῶν εἶναι (“They agreed that the same man can know how to compose both comedy and tragedy, and that the skilled tragic poet is also a skilled writer of comedies”)—to which one can add that Plato has himself done this within this very dialogue, adding satyrogaphy, as Bacon (1959) shows. Furthermore, since lyric is not considered a genre, Sappho, Stesichorus, Simonides, Pindar, et al. are seen without fuss to write in several genres. This can be seen in Pl. *Laws* 700d (after the Persian wars) ἄρχοντες μὲν τῆς ἀμουσίου παρανομίας ποιηταὶ ἐγίνοντο φύσει μὲν ποιητικοί, ἀγνώμονες δὲ περὶ τὸ δίκαιον τῆς Μούσης καὶ τὸ νόμιμον, βακχεύοντες καὶ μᾶλλον τοῦ δέοντος κατεχόμενοι ὑφ’ ἡδονῆς, κεραυνύντες δὲ θρήνους τε ὕμνοις καὶ παίωνας διθυράμβοις, καὶ αὐλωδίας δὴ ταῖς κιθαρωδίας μμούμενοι, καὶ πάντα εἰς πάντα συνάγοντες (“After the Persian wars, there came into existence poets, who, although with some innate talent in the composition of poetry, were yet ignorant as to what was just and right in the realm of the Muse. They began their unmusical lawlessness, acting like Bacchantes possessed more than is proper, combining threnodies with hymns and paeans with dithyrambs, imitating songs for the aulos on the lyre, mixing anything with anything”), where the last phrase is regularly taken to mean “mixing together all genres”. Plato’s terms, it should be noted, refer to songs characterized in the ancient mind very much by occasion, but he clearly does not mean that (e. g.) some singer sang paeonic praise of Apollo at a funeral, but that an element or elements appropriate to one song were noticeably present in another, which entails the idea of genre. See further Effe 1977, 9–26; Rosenmeyer 2006, 428–9.

2 See, for example, Asquith 2005, Atherton 1997, Cusset 2007, Effe 1977, Erren, 1986, Fabre-Serris 2004, Fakas, 2001, Gale 2004, Horster & Reitz 2005, Hutchinson 2008b and 2009, Kroll 1925, Kruschwitz & Schumacher 2005, Prince 2003, Schiesaro et. al. 1993, Toohy 1996, Volk 2002, Wöhrle 1998.

didactic poem.³ Furthermore, as for what does in fact constitute a didactic poem, this too deserves some further consideration. Accordingly, before we can consider the development of didactic poetry, we must first consider its generic typology, which in turn, for a number of reasons, *also* has its difficulties, if only because if didactic as a form or genre develops, its definition too must be a dynamic one. Any equation with both x_t and y_t , that is, two unknowns, each dependent on time, calls for some tricky calculations. To make matters even more complicated, Hesiod, who must be accounted for in any account of didactic, writes about subjects not altogether easy to gather under one rubric. There is yet another difficulty in all this, but one I would like to dispense with briefly, namely the definition of genre itself.⁴ For the moment at least, although the word has to be used, let us think of it in as untechnical a sense as possible, as if this now-English French word simply meant “kind” (cognate with “genre”) or “sort”, as we might say that Mime is a *sort* of comedy, without necessarily making any particular technical, generic, or historical claims.⁵ Another area I avoid here is the relationship between didactic poetry and the equally didactic (even if the word is not used in this context) prose that began to flourish in the fifth century.⁶

3 It was in fact a conference entitled “Diachrony” in October 2009 in Durham, North Carolina, that first led me to formulate the ideas elaborated here. To that audience, to a second in Moscow in April 2010, and finally to that in Thessaloniki, I owe many useful comments.

4 But see the intelligent and concise discussion in Swales 1990, 36–38.

5 That is, just like εἶδος with its ordinary and more technical meanings. Cf. Kässer 2005, 95, “One of the surprising aspects of ancient literary criticism is the fact that ... a category with the label ‘didactic poetry’ was never developed”. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the composition of so many (largely hexameter) poems on technical subjects could not have occurred without a keen sense that they all belong to the same kind. On the question of the very question of genre applied to ancient texts, see Rosenmeyer 2006. Although he offers many reasons to be skeptical, note his comment that “... despite the reluctance in some quarters to employ the term ‘genre’, current criticism and theory remain committed to the view that the intelligent discussion of literature, and any response to literature, require some preliminary sorting out of the material available, if only for heuristic ends” (p. 423).

6 In addition to the medical texts that can be reasonably assigned to the fifth century, a number of prose treatises are known to us usually only by title: Sophocles *Περὶ Χοροῦ*, Polyclitus *Κανόν* (fragments: DK 40 B 1–2), Ictinus on the Parthenon, Theodorus on his own art of sculpture, Simon *Peri Hippikes* (a frag. ed. K. Widdra), Agatharchus on scene painting, and Hippodamus on town planning. Exant are several works by Xenophon, including *Kynegetikos* and *Peri Hippikes* (which freely acknowledges that it incorporates Simon), on which see Hunter 2008a, 170–1. For the audience for these texts, see Fögen 2004, Asper 2007, especially ch. A 3, “Gab es ein Gattungsbewußtsein von Fachtexten in der Antike”. For the more precise relationship between individual Hellenistic poems and their prose sources, see Hutchinson 2008a and 2009). D. Fowler 2000, 217, is most sensible on the overarching question of how strict a definition we seek: “We all know that genres are always mixed in practice, but it is often convenient to use a sort of

The nature of Didactic poetry should not be mysterious. Any of us can immediately say that it is poetry that teaches, and, furthermore, we know that there was enough of it in the ancient world to deserve recognition as a distinct, though largely nameless, genre of poetry, although recently Alistair Fowler has preferred to think of didactic poetry as a *mode*, on the grounds that any poetry can teach, a view similar to that of many ancients, as we shall see.⁷ This preference for the term *mode*, although valid and useful enough, cannot do away with the more restrictive way the term is almost universally thought of by classicists. The term *genre*, then, is certainly the more familiar and still useful starting point, at least. Genres, though, as we know full well, can be as slippery as eels, all the more so when authors engage in *Kreuzung der Gattungen*—an action designed, among other things, to sensitize the reader to the precise nature or genre of the text in hand, turning it, in effect, into a metatext.

After all this, it should come as no surprise that there have been several attempts, both ancient and modern, both to define and to subdivide the genre of didactic poetry. An ancient one is found in the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, which places didactic (here called παιδευτική) poetry within poetry as a whole, and which divides it further into expository (ὑφηγητική) and theoretical (θεωρητική).⁸ See fig. 1.

Didactic receives a fuller definition in Diomedes *Ars Gramm.* p. 1.482 Keil: *didascalice est qua comprehenditur philosophia Empedoclis et Lucreti, item astrologia ut Phaenomena Arati et Ciceronis et Georgica Vergilii et his similia.*⁹

Effe 1977 analyzes didactic according to the particular aim (*Ziel/Intentionen*) of each author, type one being the most factual, where theme and content are close; that is, the author truly desires to teach. The second is more formal, such as is found in Nicander; while the third calls for going beyond the surface to find the true theme, such as in Vergil's *Georgics*. Effe explicitly ignores any

langue/parole distinction, in which individual texts will be mixed, but standing behind them will be Platonic forms of unmixed genres that structure the generic play within the texts". When the composition of the examples examined occur over a long period of time, one can, with Asper 2007, 18 n. 53, apply Saussure's term *identité diachronique*, which the latter first used to express linguistic continuity.

7 A. Fowler 2003.

8 For the text, see Koster 1975, 63–67; for discussions, see Cooper 1922 and Janko 1984.

9 See Effe 1977, 20–1; Volk 2002, 31–2. The word διδασκαλική (“instructional”) is never found *simpliciter* in extant Greek with the sense “didactic poetry”. Proclus *Chrestomathy* ap. Photius *Bibl.* 239 p. 319b5–7 lists the following kinds of poems designed for miscellaneous occasions (εἰς τὰς προσιπτούσας περιστάσεις): πραγματικά, ἔμπορικά, ἀποστολικά, γνωμολογικά, γεωργικά, ἐπιστολικά.

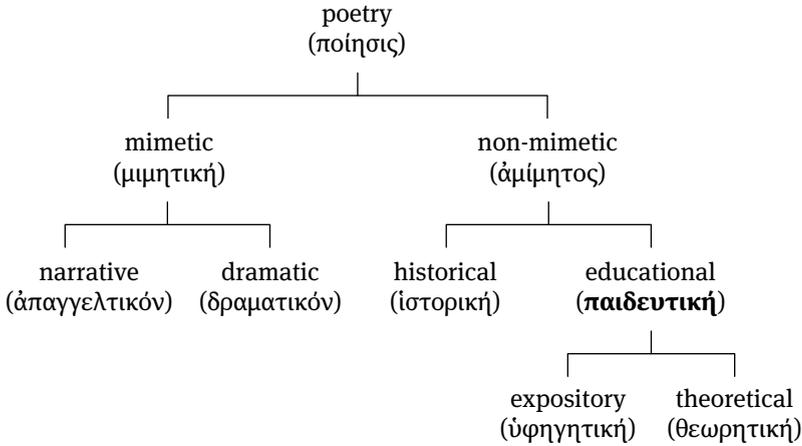


Fig. 1. Poetry’s divisions, as laid out in the mss. of the *Tractatus Coislianus*. δραματικόν is divided further into comedy, tragedy, mime, and satyr play.

historical approach to didactic.¹⁰ Volk’s criteria for didactic poetry calls for (1) explicit didactic intent (in line with Effe), (2) a teacher-student constellation (such as Hesiod and his brother Perses),¹¹ (3) poetic self-consciousness, and (4) poetic simultaneity.¹²

I have some difficulties with each of these analyses. For example, Volk’s insistence upon having what she calls a teacher-student constellation allows her rather surprisingly to exclude Parmenides from the canon of didactic poets. To this I offer two arguments. First, any scheme that excludes Parmenides is in my mind ipso facto flawed, or at any rate in need of a little flexibility. But second, one could—in fact, I have, elsewhere¹³—argue that what we find here is simply a little literary shifting of personae, where Parmenides has the goddess in the

10 Effe 1977, 34, but he makes up for this in Effe 2005, although starting from Aratus, whereas here I examine what led up to the Hellenistic period.

11 Cf. Servius ad V. G. proem (p. 129 Thilo-Hagen) *hi libri didascalici sunt, unde necesse est ut ad aliquem scribantur, nam praeceptum et doctoris et discipuli personam requirit, unde ad Maecenatem scribit* [sc. Vergilius], *sicuti Hesiodus ad Persen, Lucretius ad Memium*.

12 Cf. also D. Fowler 2000, 205: “The primary elements of didactic are [i] a teacher who is usually an explicitly characterized internal speaker, [ii] a body of knowledge that is to be imparted, and [iii] a pupil who may be a figure or figures characterized within the text or may be identified with the general reader” (my square brackets). Note that Fowler ignores [iii] in that he, unlike Volk, is quite ready to consider Parmenides a didactic poet.

13 Sider 2004. See also D. Fowler 2000, 205, who recognizes that there are elliptical ways to represent the “student”.

role of teacher and himself as the student, just as Socrates several times makes up a story in which he is berated by a senior figure fulfilling the role of *didaskalos*, such as in the *Symposium*, where Socrates substitutes himself for his host Agathon and then allows an obviously fictional Diotima (that is, fictional within the dialogue, not just in real life) to chastise him severely. Or as in the (as I think genuine) *Hippias Major*, where Socrates substitutes himself for the philosophically inadequate Hippias and then manufactures an anonymous stranger who castigates him rather than Hippias.¹⁴ Moreover, Effe's starting point of the author's intention is troublesome on its face, as authors notoriously cannot be trusted to reveal all that is on their minds. And yet, as we shall see, it is difficult to get away from authorial intention when talking about didactic, although substituting "authorial persona" for "author" does much to mitigate the problem.

Still, allow for the moment that these objections are groundless, and that not only is each of these three analyses 100% correct, but also allow that they are entirely consistent one with the other. Even so, there remains one common feature I would like to address: most analyses are static, taking for granted that "didactic poetry" was and is one and only one thing; that is, the same poetic genre, from Hesiod on, throughout antiquity and then through Fracastoro's delightful poem on Syphilis, to Josef Eberle's poem on smoking, *Ars Fumatoria*, subtitled *Carmen Didacticum*. My own diachronic study—somewhat different from that of Toohey,¹⁵—provides a different light on the topic, one which complements the static analyses. It will, among other things, suggest that despite the fact that Hesiod is universally considered the prime example of didactic poetry, this ranking was not developed until long after his death. We shall also consider what was and what was not considered a proper subject for didactic poetry, which often goes unstated. This will allow if not encourage us to return to poets not normally designated didactic to see what instructional message may have been intended.

Since it is now clear that I am interested in how the ancients themselves regarded this kind of poetry, perhaps the first thing to do is look for ways in which the Greeks thought of poetry that taught or from which one could learn, to use

¹⁴ See Sider 1977/2012.

¹⁵ Toohey 1996, 7 ff. (see also Toohey 2005, 19) lists the following stages of development: 1. Oral phase; 2. Hellenistic period, "juxtaposing literate enthusiasms with an oral manner"... "interested more in the trappings of the genre than in instruction"; 3. Cicero (trans. of Aratus) & Lucretius, the latter "invest[ing] the genre with a new seriousness", that of narrative epic; 4. Vergil's *Georgics* & Ovid's *Fasti*, both unique in "confront[ing] the issues of dynastic, political life"; 5. Horace's *Ars Poetica* & 6. Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*—both "didactic epic [as] leisure pursuit" and both "clever, playful, and entertaining artifacts".

intentionally vague descriptions. It may come as a surprise to learn that they never actually used the adjective διδακτικός to modify ποίημα or ποίησις, and in fact it is not clear when the term “didactic poetry”, in any language, was first used. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives 1756 as the earliest occurrence of this adjective applied to a poem in English, but there must have been earlier instances in other languages, although a Latinized *didacticus* does not occur in any of the Medieval Latin dictionaries available to me.¹⁶ Still, we should not do as Bruno Snell did, and deny the existence of a thought solely because we cannot find that the Greeks had a word for it.

What we do find, early on, is that Greek poetry was used for teaching purposes. Indeed, in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, we find the famous line that “poets are the teachers (*didaskaloi*) of men”, usually taken out of its context, which plainly gives us the proportion τοῖς μὲν γὰρ παιδαρίοισιν / ἐστὶ διδάσκαλος ὅστις φράζει, τοῖσιν δ’ ἥβῳσι ποιηταί, “what teachers are to boys, poets are to men”.¹⁷ We are not therefore talking about force-feeding youngsters educational poems, but about grown men learning what is important, in this case, important for the city, from poems. Nor is this notion unique to Aristophanes or a surprise to his audience. Solon and Pindar, for example, are quite forthright about their instructional roles. Note, for example Solon 4.30 – 1 W:

ταῦτα διδάξει θυμὸς Ἀθηναίους με κελεύει,
ὥς κακὰ πλείστα πόλει Δυσνομίη παρέχει.

These things my spirit bids me teach the Athenians, because Lawlessness is furnishing the city with the greatest number of evils.

And in general, one comes away from many of the elegists with the sense that whether in public or in the more private sphere of the symposium they have a message to convey. Here I cite only Tyrtaeus 11.27 W ἔρδων δ’ ὄβριμα ἔργα διδασκέσθω πολεμίζειν, although what we really have here is a protreptic to learn how to fight; not actual instruction in fighting. That Theognis meant to instruct is also clear; cf. (inter alia) 35 ἐσθλῶν μὲν γὰρ ἐσθλὰ μαθήσεται. Back to Aristophanes, though: Who are these poets that can be the teachers of men? In didactic fashion, he catalogues several of them several lines before at 1030 – 36:

¹⁶ As noted by Effe 1997, 9, Goethe used the word *didaktische* in his *Über das Lehrgedicht* (1827).

¹⁷ Cf. also *Frogs* 686 – 7 (the parabasis): τὸν ἱερὸν χορὸν δικάϊόν ἐστι χρηστὰ τῇ πόλει / ξυμπαραίνεῖν καὶ διδάσκειν, “it is the right thing for the sacred chorus to urge and teach what is useful for the city”; *Ach.* 656 – 8. See now further Hunter 2009a, ch. 1, and Halliwell 2011, ch. 3.

ταῦτα γὰρ ἄνδρας χρῆ ποιητὰς ἀσκεῖν. σκέψαι γὰρ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ὡς ὠφέλιμοι τῶν ποιητῶν οἱ γενναῖοι γεγένηται. Ὅρφευς μὲν γὰρ τελετάς θ' ἡμῖν κατέδειξε φόνων τ' ἀπέχεσθαι, Μουσαῖος δ' ἐξακέσεις τε νόσων καὶ χρησμούς, Ἡσιόδος δὲ γῆς ἐργασίας, καρπῶν ὥρας, ἀρότους· ὁ δὲ θεῖος Ὅμηρος ἀπὸ τοῦ τιμῆν καὶ κλέος ἔσχεν πλὴν τοῦδ' ὅτι χρῆστ' ἐδίδαξεν, τάξεις, ἀρετάς, ὀπλίσεις ἀνδρῶν;	1030 1035
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Consider how the best of the poets have been beneficial from the very beginning:

- (i) Orpheus showed us sacred rites and how to avoid bloodshed;
- (ii) Musaeus (showed us) cures for diseases and oracular responses;
- (iii) Hesiod (showed us) the ways to work the land, the seasons, and plows; and
- (iv) the divine Homer—from where did he gain his glorious honor if not that he taught men's strategies, virtues, and fighting?¹⁸

How didactic is Aristophanes' group? Hesiod presents no problem. Musaeus should qualify, since there are Hellenistic poems on medicine regularly taken as didactic. Orpheus, described here as a religious poet, is a tighter fit by later standards, although Ovid's *Fasti* come to mind;¹⁹ normally when we hear of Orpheus' songs, they concern cosmogonical and cosmological topics that fit more easily into the rubric of didactic. But Homer!? Nobody thinks of *him* as a didactic poet—or rather, hardly anybody nowadays at least. Effe and Volk, for example, would disqualify him on the grounds that (even if they agreed that a moral could be extracted from Homer) there is no express intent to teach.²⁰ In antiquity, on the other hand, we can point to Xenophanes B 10 D-K: ἐξ ἀρχῆς καθ' Ὅμηρον

18 Another list is provided by Isoc. *In Nic.* 43 σημείον δ' ἂν τις ποιήσαιτο τὴν Ἡσιόδου καὶ Θεόγονιδος καὶ Φωκυλίδου ποιήσιν· καὶ γὰρ τούτους φασὶ μὲν ἀρίστους γεγενῆσθαι συμβούλους τῷ βίῳ τῷ τῶν ἀνθρώπων (“One might cite as examples [sc. of sound advice that is ignored] the poetry of Hesiod, Theognis, and Phocylides, for in fact they [i.e., those who do the ignoring] agree that these men are the best counselors in how men should live”). Also of interest is Hdt. 2.53.1 οὗτοι δέ (sc. Hesiod and Homer) εἰσι οἱ ποιήσαντες θεογονίην Ἑλλησι καὶ τοῖσι θεοῖσι τὰς ἐπωνυμίας δόντες καὶ τιμὰς τε καὶ τέχνας διελόντες καὶ εἶδεα αὐτῶν σημήναντες, “these are the ones who produced a theogony, giving the gods their titles, distributing their positions and particular skills, and indicating their appearance”; that is, they taught Greeks what they themselves had invented.

19 See Miller 1980, which further discusses how hymnic elements within the *Fasti*, like parts of Callimachus' hymns, while purporting to give real-time commands to *celebrants* (which would be followed as ordered and repeated on each occurrence of the festival, and thus need not be learned, i.e., remembered) are in fact instructing *readers* in the rituals involved, an elliptical form of didactic. For Orphic cosmogonies as didactic poetry, see Prince 2003, 72–119.

20 For ethical interpretations, see P. Zanker 2004 and Sider, forthcoming.

ἐπεὶ μεμαθήκασι πάντες (“Since all men from the very start have learned from Homer”), Heraclitus B 57 διδάσκαλος δὲ πλείστων Ἡσίοδος (“Hesiod is most men’s teacher”), and even Anaxagoras, who is said to have declared that Homer’s poetry was on the subject of virtue and justice.²¹

This is all very interesting, but little of this conforms to later views of what constitutes a didactic poem. For one thing, I’ve included non-hexameter poetry, mostly elegy, but Pindar should be allowed to squeeze in as well.²² Indeed, according to the pseudo-Platonic *Hipparchus* 228b-e, the Athenian tyrant Hipparchus paid good money to two other lyric poets, Anacreon and Simonides, specifically in order to instruct the townsfolk; note in particular (Hipparchus) ἐπ’ Ανακρέοντα τὸν Τήιον πεντηκόντορον στείλας ἐκόμισεν εἰς τὴν πόλιν, Σιμωνίδην δὲ τὸν Κεῖον αἰεὶ περὶ αὐτὸν εἶχεν, μεγάλοις μισθοῖς καὶ δώροις πειθῶν· ταῦτα δ’ ἐποίει βουλόμενος παιδεύειν τοὺς πολίτας (“Hipparchus sent a fifty-oared ship to bring Anacreon of Teos to Athens, and he always had Simonides of Ceos at his side, persuading him with lots of money and gifts. He did this in his desire to educate the citizens”).

Since this would not work with the less sophisticated country folk, for them Hipparchus erected herms with messages in an elegiac couplet that he composed himself, the hexameter giving the herm’s (and the viewer’s) location, and the hexameter beginning with an identification of himself as author in a shameless act of self-promotion, followed by a precept illustrating what the *Hipparchus* says of his aim in all this: ἐθαύμαζον αὐτὸν ἐπὶ σοφίᾳ. Two of these “commandments” are quoted here (228ab): Hipparchus fr. 1–2 Diehl:

μνημα τόδ’ Ἰππάρχου· στείχε δίκαια φρονῶν·
μνημα τόδ’ Ἰππάρχου· μὴ φίλον ἐξαπάτα.²³

1. This monument erected by Hipparchus: Make your way thinking just thoughts.
2. This monument erected by Hipparchus: Do not deceive a friend.

The generic range of useful/beneficial/instructive poetry is therefore quite wide. Furthermore, the very premise of the *Frogs* is that tragedy can benefit—to which

²¹ Anaxagoras A 1 = Diog. Laert. 2.11 δοκεῖ δὲ πρῶτος [sc. Anaxagoras], καθά φησι Φαβωρίνος [fr. 61 Barigazzi] ἐν Παντοδαπῇ ἱστορίᾳ, τὴν Ὀμήρου ποιήσιν ἀποφίνασθαι εἶναι περὶ ἀρετῆς καὶ δικαιοσύνης.

²² See Kurke 1990, an excellent study of “advice” poetry (ὑποθήκαι).

²³ Although Ps.-Plato says that the hexameter, which announced the viewer’s location, is on one side of the herm and the “didactic” pentameter on the other, the one extant stone to contain such an inscription has them together on the right side: *CEG* 304 [ἐ]ν μέσῳ Κεφαλῆς τε καὶ ἄστεος ἀγλαὸς Ἑρμῆς. | [μνημα τόδ’ Ἰππάρχου· ---] (“A herm halfway between Kephale and town. This monument erected by Hipparchus...”).

one can add Aristophanes himself and his fellow comic poets, who are always ready in their parabases to offer instruction to fellow Athenians.

But this early generous attitude toward instructional poetry, which differs markedly from the Hellenistic one, brings me to my point: didactic has to be seen and judged diachronically. Note, for example, how much ethical and, not entirely a separate matter, religious content determines the matter early on as to what is didactic in this early generous view. Yet when we think about the various poems *now* universally called didactic, none is ethical in content. Note that for all that Lucretius has to say on the fear of death, which admittedly has some transparently ethical implications, his poem famously omits Epicurus' ethical writings. Is this because he never got around to tackling this subject, as used to be thought? Or is it rather that he felt uncomfortable trying to accommodate straightforward ethical matters to what had become by his time a rather restrictive genre?

For your amusement I urge you to read an amusing poem by the American James Russell Lowell written in 1857 entitled *The Origin of Didactic Poetry*, in which a young Athena produces a moral epic so stultifying dull it drives all the other gods from Olympus. His poem ends with a moral spoken by an older and wiser Athena: "The Muse is unforgiving; / Put all your beauty in your rhymes, / Your morals in your living". Lowell's idea may well enunciate the unexpressed Hellenistic attitude that ethics is too boring a subject for didactic poetry. And not only ethics, but history too came in time to be felt to be a subject alien to didactic, although we know that, earlier, poems tracing a particular city's origins, although starting with what we call myth, covered historical events as well.²⁴

It is now clear that in the archaic and classical period, there was no clear-cut, or even rough-cut, sense of a didactic genre. Alistair Fowler's *mode* works fine. Aristophanes' phrase in its cut-down version was generally felt to be true: poets are the teachers of men. It is certainly true that Plato in the *Republic* thought that the young were shaped politically and morally by what they saw in the theatre and from the myths they heard, largely in poetic form. Aristotle may have been the first to separate out didactic when in the *Poetics* he famously says that "Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except their meter, which is why the one is justly called poet and the other physiologist rather than poet", οὐδὲν δὲ κοινόν ἐστιν Ὀμήρω καὶ Ἐμπεδοκλεῖ πλὴν τὸ μέτρον, διὸ τὸν μὲν

²⁴ This did not stop the city of Halicarnassus from commissioning a historical poem to be erected in the late second century BC; see Isager and Pedersen 2004, esp. 84 on its possible generic label.

ποιητὴν δίκαιον καλεῖν, τὸν δὲ φυσιολόγον μᾶλλον ἢ ποιητὴν. This despite the fact that twice elsewhere in the *Poetics* and again in the *Rhetoric* he illustrates poetic tropes with examples from Empedocles (*Poet.* 1457b23–25, 1461a23–25; *Rhet.* 1373b13, 1407a34); and that in his now-lost work *On Poets*, he calls Empedocles “Homeric” in his poetic use of language; that is, in ways other than meter.²⁵ We should also note, as Ivana Petrovic reminds me, that, when Socrates proves to Ion that one cannot become a general by reading Homer, implicit is the idea that poetry cannot teach, which would if taken seriously mean that the label didactic is inapplicable to poetry in general.²⁶

Aristotle may have been the first person explicitly to separate the useful in poetry from the more poetical, and thus to give us an early adumbration of the didactic genre, but his downgrading of the practical in poetry was not destined to become standard. Even without explicit distinctions, however, it is clear that didactic poetry as a genre was essentially invented in Hellenistic times, and then retrojected backward in time to include only those earlier poets that conformed to Hellenistic notions: *in primis* Hesiod, but also the Presocratics Xenophanes (in his hexameters, not his elegiacs), Parmenides (despite Volk’s attempt to exclude him), and Empedocles. Indeed, one would have to say that in many ways Empedocles rivals Aratus for prime didactic poet. Aratus may have been translated more often into Latin, but Empedocles was alluded to and adapted more often, with clear echoes showing up in Lucretius, Ovid, and even Oppian (*Hal.* 1.412–16).²⁷

To a certain extent, this Hellenistic invention of what is still the modern view of didactic poetry can be seen most famously in Callimachus’ address to Aratus, Ἡσιόδου τό τ’ αἴσιμα καὶ ὁ τρόπος, which establishes the important link between “scientific” subject matter and hexameter verse.²⁸ Aratus, however, did not write

25 Aristotle fr. 39.1 Gigon = 65a Rose (Diog. Laert. 8.57) Ἀριστοτέλης ... ἐν δὲ τῷ περὶ Ποιητῶν φησὶν ὅτι καὶ Ὀμηρικὸς ὁ Ἐμπεδοκλῆς καὶ δεινὸς περὶ τὴν φράσιν γέγονε, μεταφορικὸς τ’ ὢν καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις τοῖς περὶ ποιητικῆν ἐπιτεύγμασι χρώμενος (“Aristotle is his work *On Poets* says that Empedocles is skilled, even Homeric, in expression, making good use of metaphor and all other poetic refinements”). Also laudatory is Aristotle’s statement that Empedocles invented rhetoric (fr. 39.2–3 G = 65b–c R).

26 See Pl. *Io* 541b εὔ’ ἴσθι, ᾧ Σώκρατες· καὶ ταῦτά [sc. how to be the best general] γε ἐκ τῶν Ὀμήρου μαθὼν (“Know this, Socrates: even this I have learned from Homer”).

27 See, e.g., Bignone 1929 (Ennius), Sedley 2003 (Lucretius), Hardie 1995 (Ovid), Pascal 1902 (Horace).

28 Callim. *Epigram* 27 Pf. = 56 Gow-Page (*A.P.* 9.507). There is no room here even to survey the large literature on this epigram and its programmatic meaning; cf., e.g., Hunter 2009a, 257–62, which among other things considers the possibility that the word ἔσχατον (if the papyrus reading ἀοιδῶν for ἀοιδόν is adopted) modifies τρόπος.

a poetic treatise *ab ovo*; but translated the prose text of Eudoxus; and translation of prose into verse becomes a Hellenistic hallmark.²⁹ There is a telling anecdote about how Aratus came to do this, showing the new relationship between prose original and poetic translation. Antigonus the ruler of Pella supposedly simply gave Aratus a copy of Eudoxus with the challenge to put it into verse, so that he, Aratus, would make Eudoxus εὐδοκιώτερος, which punningly translates as both “more famous” and also as “more Eudoxian”.³⁰ Implicit in this story is the entirely believable idea that Aratus had previously given little thought to astronomy, let alone this particular task, and it is probably fair to extend this to almost all the other composers of didactic poetry. For Aratus, the idea of poetic challenge weighed far more than any educational (that is, didactic) purpose.

It is said that Menecrates of Ephesus, Aratus’ teacher, also turned scientific prose into verse (which includes at least Aristotle on bees) in his Hesiodic poem, so Aratus was certainly not the first. Who, though, was the first person to versify a pre-existing prose text? Was it Socrates, who whiled away the hours in prison by turning Aesop into verse?³¹ In, probably, the fourth century a certain Scythinus was said to have turned Heraclitus into poetry, probably into iambs.³² It could also be said that the author of the *Hipparchus* snidely suggests that all Hipparchus did was versify his own prosaic thoughts, but an important criterion

²⁹ As argued in Sider and Brunschön 2007, 14–15, Eudoxus was Aratus’ only prose source and the common view that Aratus went to the treatise *On Weather Signs* (attributed in modern times to Theophrastus) is wrong.

³⁰ Achilles in *Arati Phaenomena*, fragm. p. 77 Maass ὃς (sc. Aratus) παρὰ τῷ βασιλεῖ (sc. Antigono Gonata) γενόμενος καὶ εὐδοκιμήσας ἔν τε τῇ ἄλλῃ πολυμαθείᾳ καὶ <τῇ> ποιητικῇ προετράπη ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ τὰ Φαινόμενα γράψαι, τοῦ βασιλέως Εὐδόξου ἐπιγραφόμενον βιβλίον Κάτοπτρον δόντος αὐτῷ καὶ ἀξιώσαντος τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ καταλογάδην λεχθέντα περὶ τῶν φαινομένων μέτρῳ ἐντεῖναι καὶ ἅμα εἰπόντος, ὡς “εὐδοξότερον ποιεῖς τὸν Εὐδόξον ἐντεῖνας τὰ παρ’ αὐτῷ κείμενα μέτρῳ.” (“When Aratus, famous (εὐδοκιμήσας) for knowing all sorts of things but for poetry in particular, was at the court of Antigonus, the king urged him to write the *Phainomena*, giving him a copy of Eudoxus’ *Katoptron* and asking that he versify what was there laid out in a bare-bones account of the heavens, telling him that “you will make Eudoxus eudoxier by turning his contents into verse”).

³¹ Pl. *Phdo.* 60c-d. Nightingale 1995, 2, includes this passage among others where “Plato mixes traditional genres ... and disrupts the generic boundaries...”, but since we do not hear these poems, we should rather consider these as more relevant to Socrates the man than to Plato the author. I thank Suzanne Saïd for the reference to Nightingale.

³² Diog. Laert. 9.16 = Scythinus *FGrHist* 13 T 2 Σκυθῖνον τὸν τῶν Ἰάμβων ποιητὴν ἐπιβαλέσθαι τὸν ἐκείνου λόγον διὰ μέτρον ἐκβάλλειν (“Scythinus the iambic poet took it upon himself to publish a metrical version of Heraclitus’ book”).

here is versifying someone else's prose. Still, one can see that such versifications were rare until the Hellenistic efflorescence of didactic.³³

Thus, a preliminary diachronic scheme now suggests itself, each after the first adding something new to what had gone before.

- (i) Poets in the Archaic and Classical periods write poems in various meters that, ignoring for the moment the conservative nature of oral poetry, are their own compositions. Although many of these compositions come to be considered "useful" or "beneficial", didactic as such does not exist as a genre until, perhaps, the three presocratic poets led people to view them as Aristotle did. It is no more than a tendency to put much of these into hexameters, a tendency best illustrated by the division of subject matter and verse in Xenophanes.
- (ii) The Hellenistic stage: Poets versify preexisting prose treatises, predominately but not entirely, in hexameters.
- (iii) In the third stage, the Romans continue to favor hexameters, but innovate in yet another way: translation of a Hellenistic didactic poem, itself depending on a prose text, into Latin. Thus, e.g., Eudoxus > Aratus > Cicero and others.³⁴

The situation is of course more fluid than this; in particular, any author in stage ii or iii can return to an earlier form, such as Eratosthenes' *Duplication of the Cube* (ii > i) or Lucretius (iii > ii). In addition, in the ever so didactic section on rivers in his *Hymn to Zeus*, Callimachus is almost certainly versifying his own treatise *On Rivers*, which brings us back to stage i. Furthermore, while formalizing didactic as largely dactylic and technical, there were still deviations, such as some elegiac examples (e.g., Dorotheus of Sidon's astronomical poem) and some others that deviate from the usual run of topics.³⁵ Even more deviant is Callimachus' elegiac *Aetia*, which, even as Hellenistic poets were formulating a core idea of didactic as a genre, was pushing hard at these inchoate definitions.³⁶

And the complex Roman contribution to the genre, which looks back, innovates, and mixes didactic with other genres (*in primis* Ovid's *Metamorphoses*),

³³ See appendix, below.

³⁴ They innovate in many other ways as well of course, and Toohey 2005, 19, is right to speak of a Roman "reinvention".

³⁵ And perhaps one should note here Posidippus' experiment in didactic epigram; see Sider (2005).

³⁶ Annette Harder 1998 and 2007 has shown this most clearly; see now Harder 2012, 27–33. For a broader picture of Callimachus' scientific interests, see Sistakou 2009b.

can only be hinted at here, in large part because of their great inventiveness. For in addition to a number of poems that fall squarely into didactic, there are some that do much to extend the boundaries. Examples of the former would certainly include Lucretius, who, in ways we are continuing to learn as new parts of Epicurus' papyri of his *Περὶ Φύσεως* are published, translated his master's prose into verse.³⁷ Nonetheless, anyone who has read any significant amount of Epicurus' unexciting prose will see that Lucretius has done far more than merely translate as he accommodates Epicurean content to Empedoclean poetics. Vergil's *Georgics* should probably also be included in this first group, however much he artfully avoids quoting Hesiod directly while evoking a thoroughly Hesiodic flavor.³⁸ Other Roman examples, however, take great delight in playfully transgressing generic boundaries, such as Horace's *Ars Poetica*, which is a triumph of self-reflexive examination, a poetic form used later by Karl Shapiro.³⁹ The very word *ars* in the title, clearly evoking the prosaic τέχνη that accompanied many earlier Greek prose treatises, declares its intentions, just as Ovid used it later in his *Ars Amatoria*, which pretends to be versification of preexisting Greek love manuals, such as that of Philainis.⁴⁰ Horace's *Ars Poetica* is his own composition, however, in that, in a way reminiscent of Hesiod, for all that it draws on Hellenistic prose treatises on the nature of poetry, it is meant to represent Horace's own views on the matter. In form, it may not differ from Horace's two literary epistles, but this is in harmony with the ease with which Romans slipped between didactic and other genres. A test case for all this is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which many modern scholars do not regard as at all didactic. I think, though, that an original reader would have no doubts. It opens with a declaration of purpose that cannot but recall to its learned audience such Hellenistic didactic epics as Nicander's *Heteroioumena*, Antigonus' *Alloioseis* and, even more so, Didymarchus' *Metamorphoses*. These Hellenistic poems of mythical transformations, however, it is probably safe to assume, were, however artful in the details, versifications of preexisting prose handbooks of mythological transformations, such as we see in Apollodorus; that is, one story follows another, with only the weakest link (perhaps a chronological one) between them, whereas Ovid separates himself from his predecessors by alluding to the proem of Callimachus' *Aetia*, itself a sort of concatenation of mythical tales, where Callimachus defends himself against the charge that he has not

³⁷ See Sedley 2003.

³⁸ See Wender 1979.

³⁹ Shapiro 1945. Cf. vv. 43–45: “Perhaps Lucretius felt that through the means | of language highly charged, more could be said | of his philosophy than prose could prove.”

⁴⁰ See Vessey 1976.

written an ἄξιμα διηνεκές, “a continuous poem”, presumably a long poem such as an epic of any sort, Homeric or Hesiodic. He defends himself not by claiming that he has done so, but rather by saying that a poem can be good without being long. Ovid, therefore, who weaves many Roman *aetia* into his own *Metamorphoses*, proclaims that he will one-up Callimachus by composing a *perpetuum carmen*, and whatever else the *Metamorphoses* turns out to be, in the first four lines it fairly clearly declares itself a didactic poem, as it narrates a cosmogony of a general sort overlaid with unmistakable Empedoclean allusions. (I say little here about the 404-line Empedoclean didactic epyllion embedded within book 15 and put into the mouth of Pythagoras, except to note that it is in perfect accord with what I have been calling the general playfulness of Roman poets with the didactic genre.)⁴¹ Note too that just as Callimachus’ *Aetia* IV ends with a metamorphosis in the form of a catasterism that supposedly took place in historical times—that of Queen Berenice’s lock of hair—so too does Ovid end his *Metamorphoses* with the assumption into heaven of Julius Caesar.

But how innovative was Ovid in composing his didactic *perpetuum carmen*? In one way, Ovid’s poem is the most daring experiment in genre, as it starts with an old-fashioned Hesiodic- and Empedoclean-style didactic poem, which then elliptically announces that it will be Callimachean as well, but which also in the course of its development assumes the mantle of Vergil as it takes us through the birth and history of Rome. In another way, however, I would say that it is in fact not all that innovative, because from the very start what we now call didactic has always been ready to incorporate various genres within itself.

A case could be made for Hesiod’s having done just this in both his extant poems. In the *Works & Days*, it is easiest here to limit ourselves to the first 382 lines, but what I have to say can be extended to the whole poem. First, we should read Hesiod’s proem as we read other epic authors, and observe that that by a purely formal analysis, the subject is Zeus. That is, if you ask an experienced classicist for the subject of the *Works and Days*, he or she would probably smile and say “works and days”. But suppose you were to show this to a young classicist, one who has read Homer, Vergil, and a few other opening passages of epic along with some hymns, but one miraculously ignorant of Hellenistic poetry. This person would analyze Hesiod’s opening four lines formally and say that the subject of the poem was clearly going to be Zeus:

Μοῦσαι Περίηθεν ἀοιδῆσι κλείουσαι,
δεῦτε Δί' ἐννέπετε, σφέτερον πατέρ' ὑμνείουσαι.

⁴¹ See Hardie 1995.

ὄν τε διὰ βροτοὶ ἄνδρες ὁμῶς ἄφατοὶ τε φατοὶ τε,
 ῥητοὶ τ' ἄρητοι τε Διὸς μέγαλοιο ἔκητι.

Muses of Pieria, famed for your song, hither come and speak of Zeus, hymning your father.
 Thanks to him, mortal men are either famous or not, spoken of or not, for the sake of great Zeus.

Although these lines are often taken as or at least thought of as a (theoretically) detachable Zeus-hymn,⁴² it can easily be argued that this is indeed precisely what the poem is about—not Zeus in all his aspects, but as Hesiod reveals, Zeus in his role of judge of human actions—Zeus δικηφόρος, as Aeschylus calls him in the *Agamemnon* (525–6). Briefly, then, 11–41 is on Strife (ἔρις), in general (two kinds) and then as it pertains to Hesiod and his brother as they contest over their inheritance (= means of livelihood); cf. 35–6 ἀλλ' αὐθι διακρινόμεθα νεῖκος / ἰθείησι δίκης, αἳ τ' ἐκ Διὸς εἰσιν ἄριστα (“But let us decide our differences right now with straight judgement, which come best from Zeus”). Next come 42–89 on Livelihood (βίος) hidden by gods, esp. Zeus (42), as illustrated by the story of Prometheus and Pandora. It is Zeus who allowed us to have Hope. Next 106–201: The Races of men, all but the first under the control of Zeus (138, silver; 143, bronze; 158, heroes; 169, iron; 180, the generation to come). This is followed by 202–212: the Fable of hawk and nightingale. The next long section can be broken down into (i) 213–247: Justice and hybris, overseen by Zeus (238–247) (ii) 248–273: Rant against princes: Zeus observes and punishes (253) those whose wrongdoing he has heard from Dike; (iii) 274–382: Back to Perses. Zeus gave Dike to men (276, 281). Live right. Rules of behavior. This is the end of the tight Zeus section, but 383 to the end—in other words, The Works (383–764) & Days (765–828)—, containing details of proper/just (agricultural) living/livelihood, which the first part of the poem tells us that all this depends on Zeus. In other words, this traditional title may be missing the point. A better title would be the *Zeusiad*.⁴³ But all these several genres—parable, fable, rant, exhortation, etc.—fit so comfortably within Hesiod’s poem that we have no problem seeing it as a unit with its own generic title of didactic, albeit one that is very much ethical in purpose, despite what later ages thought of ethical didactic poetry (as I said earlier). Didactic poetry, in other words, as it was understood

⁴² Cf., e.g., Fakas (2001), 11–18; Rousseau (1996) 93–4, who speaks of “la transition entre cet éloge et le développement qui suit”.

⁴³ With this hasty Zeus-focused analysis, cf. Clay 2009, 72–3, “the changing faces of Zeus must be mapped over the course of the poem; for the role that Hesiod ascribes Zeus modulates ...”. For a complex and sophisticated analysis of how Hesiod may or may not be considered a didactic poet, see Nelson 1998, 48–58.

from the Hellenistic age onward, is a type that purports to teach (Effe's "intention" again), but on a formal level can be a congeries of subtypes each capable of bearing its own generic label if found elsewhere.

A natural stopping point for the genre would have been Ovid's *Remedia Amoris*. Here we find not only a counter-didactic, in that Ovid is trying to provide an antidote for the learning he had supplied earlier in the *Ars Amatoria*, which was, it seems, altogether too successful. Its readers now have too many women in pursuit.⁴⁴ Of all the countermeasures Ovid offers, my favorite way of immersing oneself in the study of agricultural matters (*studium colendi*, 169), which suggests a scene in which a person reads one didactic poem, the *Remedia Amoris*, only to be told to read a second didactic poem, *The Works and Days*, in order to counter the effects of yet another didactic poem, *The Ars Amatoria*.⁴⁵ This did not turn out to be the stopping point for didactic poetry, but it seems a natural place to end this discussion on didactic poetry.⁴⁶

APPENDIX

Hellenistic didactic poems

Only three long ones are extant, one by Aratus and two by Nicander, but several short poems seem complete, such as those of Archimedes and Eratosthenes. Most, though, are quite fragmentary, if not known only by title. Nonetheless, even a list as sketchy as this demonstrates the great popularity of didactic in the Hellenistic period. Works in dactylic hexameter (or assumed so in the lack of evidence to the contrary) are unmarked; elegiac works are so indicated. For a more detailed survey of this material, see Harder 2011, 176–85. CA = *Collectanea Alexandrina*; SH = *Supplementum Hellenisticum*.

Aglaias (medical, elegiac, SH 18)

Alexander Aitolos

Alexander of Ephesos, *Phainomena* (SH 20), geographical (SH 23–28)

Anacreon, *Phaenomena*, eleg. (CA 130)

Antigonos, *Alloiosis* (SH 50)

⁴⁴ For Ovid's generic games in this poem, see Fréchet 2006.

⁴⁵ The passage on how to farm extends from vv. 169 to 197, touching on topics such as plowing and planting, fruit trees, goats, cattle, and grapes. A mention of bees calls Vergil to mind as well.

⁴⁶ But not before I thank Richard Hunter for his comments, as well as many others who have heard one or another form of this talk over the past few years in Durham (North Carolina), Moscow, and Thessaloniki, as well as my students in New York and Venice.

- Anubion, astrological elegies
 Aratus, **Phainomena* (tr. > Lat. by Cicero, Ovid, Avienus, and Germanicus); *Iatrika*
 Archelaus Chersonites, mirabilia SH 125–9
 Archimedes, *Problema* (SH 201)
 Arcestratus, *Hedypatheia* (food, SH 132–92)
 Boius, *Ornithogonia* (tr. > Lat. by Aemilius Acer)
 Caecalus, *Halieutica* SH 237
 Callimachus *Aetia*, eleg.
 Callimachus Junior, *On Islands* (SH 309)
 Damocrates Servilius, medical, iambs, ed. Vogt, forthcoming
 Didymarchus, *Metamorphoses* (SH 378 A)
 Dorotheus of Sidon, astronomical elegy, ed. Pingree
 Eratosthenes, *Hermes, Duplication of the Cube* (CA 58ff)
 Eudemus, medical (SH 412)
 Euthydemus, on dried fish (SH 455)
 Hegesianax, *Phainomena* (SH 465–70, CA 8–9)
 Heliodorus, medical (SH 471)
 Hermesianax, *Leontion* (catalogue poem; CA 98–106)
 Hermippus, *Phainomena* (SH 485–90)
 Menecrates of Ephesus, *Erga, Bee Keeping* (SH 542–50)
 Mnesitheus, *On Wine*, in iambs (fr. 41 Bertier)
 Neoptolemus, *Trichotonia* (?) (CA 27)
 Nicaenetus, *Catalogue of Women* (CA 2)
 Nicander, **Theriaka*, **Alexipharmaka*, *Heteroionumena*, *Georgica*, *Melissourgica Ophiaca*
 Nicomachus, *On Painters*, elegies
 Numenius, *Theriaca*, *Halieutika* (SH 568–94)
 Orus, medical
 Pancrates of Argos, *Thalassia Erga* (SH 598–600)
 Parthenius, *Metamorphoses* (SH 636–7)
 Pausanias of Damascus, geography, in iambs (perh. = Ps.-Scymnus)
 Periander, physician who wrote verse (Plut. *Apophth.Lac.* 218f)
 Petrichus, on snakes (Pliny *NH* 20.96, 22.40; schol. in Nicand. *Ther.* 226)
 Philo of Tarsos, medical (SH 690)
 Polycratus of Mende, *Sicelica*, natural science ([Arist.] *Mirab.* 840b32)
 Posidippus of Pella, didactic epigrams
 Posidonius of Corinth, *Halieutika* (SH 709)
 Sosicrates (or Sostratos), Ἡοῖοι, *Cynegetica* (SH 732, 735)
 Satyrus, on stones (SH 717–19)
 Simias, on the names of months (fr. 8 CA)
 Sminthes, *Phainomena* (SH 729)
 Theodorus, *Metamorphoses* (SH 749)
 Theodotus, *On the Jews* (SH 757–764)
 Timachidas, *Deipna* (SH 769–773)
 Timaristus, flowers (Pliny *NH* 21.105)
 Timon of Phlius, *Indalmoi* (= *Phainomena*; elegiacs, SH 841–4)
 Zenothemis, on stones (SH 855–858)