

Epigrams: Super Short Poetry

Origins

- Early lyric poems already display considerable variety in length
- Stesichorus could extend to multiple books
- Other poets like Anacreon could write poems extending only to a few lines or stanzas
- These were specifically literary compositions, intended largely for sympotic performance contexts

Origins

- 'Epigrams' have their origins etymologised in their name
- ἐπί – γράμμα: a writing (γράμμα) on (ἐπί) some surface, whether a wall, stele, or other object
- By definition, then, epigrams are all essentially practical and unique texts
 - The meaning relies on the object; poem and object are inextricably linked, and therefore cannot easily be studied in isolation

Origins

- The first example of Greek writing we have is in fact an epigram
- This is the so-called 'Nestor's Cup', found (and still displayed) on the island of Ischia (just west of Neapolis)
- The epigram is (mostly) in verse, though the first line's form is different to the second and third hexameter lines:
 - Νεστορος ειμι ευποτον ποτεριον
φος δ' αν τοδε πιεσι ποτεριο αυτικα κενον
φιμερος φαιρεσει καλλιστεφανο Αφροδιτες
 - I am the cup of Nestor, good to drink from;
whoever drinks from this cup, immediately
the desire of fair-crowned Aphrodite will seize him.

Origins

- Already in this epigram a number of features of the genre that would become programmatic are present:
 - In verse
 - Written as if the object is the speaker
 - Deals with erotic themes
 - The gods are invoked
- The other prominent genre of epigram was sepulchral, poems composed for a dead person and inscribed on their grave
 - These were 'spoken' not by the tomb itself, but by the shade of the deceased
 - Three pieces of information were typically given:
 - Name
 - City
 - Parents

Origins – Professionalisation

- Many objects, such as Nestor's Cup, were clearly inscribed by people at symposia, essentially *ad hoc* compositions, and part of the fun atmosphere of the party
- Other epigrams had more serious purposes:
 - Sepulchral epigrams needed to both convey information and honour the deceased with appropriate (and high quality) poetry
 - Dedicatory epigrams, inscribed on objects offered to the gods, needed to honour the god and express the devotee's desire

Origins – Professionalisation

- To meet the need for these increasingly high-quality epigrams, professional and specific poets could be commissioned
 - Many shrines would have poets attached or lurking outside to offer their services to visitors
- This could extend even to panhellenic, famous poets like Simonides, who composed an epigram for the Spartan Megistias at Thermopylae
 - μνήμα τόδε κλεινοῖο Μεγιστία, ὃν ποτε Μῆδοι
Σπερχειὸν ποταμὸν κτεῖναν ἀμειψάμενοι,
μάντιος, ὃς τότε κῆρας ἐπερχομένας σάφα εἰδώς
οὐκ ἔτλη Σπάρτης ἡγεμόνα προλιπεῖν.
 - This is the tomb of glorious Megistias, whom the Medes once killed, crossing the river Sperchius, a prophet, who despite knowing well what fate was coming did not accept leaving the leader of the Spartans.

Origins – Professionalisation

- This poem is preserved for us not in its original location, but by Herodotus, who mentions it at 7.228 (along with two other epigrams inscribed at Thermopylae by other poets)
- Herodotus may well have visited and seen it himself, but he provides an early example of epigram transmission
- Famous examples of epigrams could be collected by others and then published, forming early epigram collections

Hellenistic Developments

- In the Hellenistic period we begin to see the birth of epigrams as a specifically literary genre, which would reach its zenith at Rome with Martial's 14-book collection
- Almost all Hellenistic (and indeed Greek) epigrams come from collections
- These collections were not arranged by the poet themselves, but by later readers who compiled various poets' works
 - The most famous of these is Meleager's Garland, an anthology of Greek epigrams across time and space

Hellenistic Developments

- The ways in which these anthologies were compiled are not entirely clear to us
- The most plausible scenario is comparable to modern playlists
- Readers would select epigrams which they liked best, and then either copy those onto a separate papyrus themselves or (more expensively) hire a scribe to do it for them
- This led to some issues of misattribution in the manuscript tradition

Hellenistic Developments – The Book

- Our assumptions about the ways in which epigrams were published were largely confirmed by the publication of the Posidippus Papyrus
- Posidippus was an early Alexandrian poet, very closely connected to the Ptolemaic court
- Some of his epigrams were already known, including one apparently inscribed to commemorate the Pharos

Hellenistic Developments – The Book

- The papyrus discovered (from mummy wrappings) contained just over 120 epigrams, generally of short length
- Of these, around three were already known and all assigned to Posidippus, so all the other poems were assigned to him as well
- This means that this papyrus is our best and strongest evidence for what a published, original book of epigrams looked like, as literary rather than physical compositions

Hellenistic Developments – The Book

- The most important thing to note in this regard is that the book was divided into sections, all of which were thematic
- Thus the first section was the *lithika*, epigrams (theoretically) carved on gems or other small precious items (e.g. shells)
- Other sections included epigrams on tombs, but also on omens and statues
 - All of these were where you would expect to find epigrams in the ancient world; their thematic integration into one book indicates the multivalent nature of Hellenistic epigram composition

Hellenistic Epigram – Callimachus

- Callimachus' epigrams reveal the same concern with variety that characterise Posidippus' poems
- Unfortunately their preservation in multiple different anthologies or quotations means we cannot tell how they were arranged
- There are some common 'genres' of epigram:
 - Sepulchral (for tombs)
 - Erotic (for inscription/performance at symposia)
 - Dedicatory (for offerings to gods)
 - Metaliterary (talking about poetry)

Hellenistic Epigram – Callimachus

- The metaliterary epigrams theoretically exist as poems to be inscribed as tags on papyrus books of other poets
- Many are therefore complementary; others are clearly not
- These conflict with other generic markers, and are indicative of the variation characteristic of epigram: many of Callimachus' epigrams switch genre, or include metaliterary comments in other genres

Callimachus and Genre

- Callimachus 2:
 - Εἶπέ τις, Ἡράκλειτε, τέδ' ὄν μορον, ἐς δέ με δάκρυ
ἤγαγεν, ἐμνήσθην δ' ὅσσ' ἄμφω ἀμφότεροι
ἥλιον ἐν λέσχῃ κατεδύσαμεν· ἀλλὰ σὺ μὲν που,
ξεῖν' Ἀλικαρνησεῦ, τετράπαλαι σποδιή·
αἱ δὲ τεαῖ ζώουσιν ἀηδόνες, ἥσιν ὁ πάντων
ἄρπακτὴς Αἴδης οὐκ ἐπὶ χεῖρα βαλεῖ.
 - Someone, Heraclitus, spoke of your death and moved me
to tears, and I remembered how often both of us
would watch the sun go down in conversation; but now you
Halicarnassian friend, are dust for a very long time.
But your nightingales live, to which Hades, taker
of all, does not stretch out his hand.
- This poem shows the combination of sepulchral and metaliterary – Callimachus mourns his friend, but also comments on the kind of poetry he prefers
 - Nightingales – beautiful and small singers, like the beautiful and small poems of Callimachus

Callimachus and Genre

- Callimachus 13:
 - Σύντομος ἦν ὁ ξεῖνος· ὃ καὶ στίχος οὐ μακρὰ λέξων
“Θῆρις Ἀρισταίου Κρής” ἐπ’ ἐμοὶ δολιχός.
 - Short was the stranger, so even the line, not speaking long
("Theris son of Aristaeus, Cretan"), is long on me.
- This epigram is incredibly short, and boasts about shortness
- Theoretically sepulchral (for a Theris son of Aristaeus), but ties into Callimachean ideals
- The actual epigram described in Callimachus' epigram is only three lines, and conveys all necessary information as briefly as possible

Callimachus and Genre

- Callimachus 19:
 - ὦφελε μηδ' ἐγένοντο θοαὶ νέες· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἡμεῖς
παῖδα Διοκλείδου Σώπολιν ἐστένομεν.
νῦν δ' ὁ μὲν εἶν ἄλῖ που φέρεται νέκυς, ἀντὶ δ' ἐκείνου
οὔνομα καὶ κενεὸν σῆμα παρερχόμεθα.
 - Would that swift ships had never been born! For we would not
be lamenting Sopolis, son of Diocleides.
But now I suppose his corpse is floating in the sea, and instead of him
we pass by a name and empty tomb.
- Again clearly sepulchral in form, for a theoretical Sopolis son of Diocleides
- The opening line is an allusion to the beginning of Euripides' *Medea* (cf. lines 1, 6:);
Callimachus integrates tragedy into his poetry, in fact here an 'empty tomb' containing
no physical body at all

Callimachus and Genre

- Callimachus 37:
 - Βαττιάδεω παρὰ σῆμα φέρεις πόδας, εὖ μὲν ἀοιδὴν εἰδότος, εὖ δ' οἴνω καίρια συγγελάσαι.
 - You bring your feet past the tomb of the son of Battus, who knew well how to sing, and to laugh with wine at the right time.
- This epigram is in fact for Callimachus himself (identified only as 'son of Battus')
- Perhaps a *sphragis* for his own poetry?
- Wine/water as sources for poetic inspiration were prominent themes in the Hellenistic period, though Callimachus often claims an aversion to wine (cf. *Aetia* fr. 156)

Callimachus and Genre

- Callimachus 47.1-4:
 - Ὡς ἀγαθὰν Πολύφαμος ἀνέυρετο τὰν ἐπαιδὸν
τῶραμένω· ναὶ Γᾶν, οὐκ ἀμαθὴς ὁ Κύκλωψ·
αἱ Μοῦσαι τὸν ἔρωτα κατισχναίνοντι, Φίλιππε·
ἡ πανακὲς πάντων φάρμακον ἅ σοφία.
 - How good was the spell that Polyphemus discovered
for the lover! By Gaia, the Cyclops was not unlearned.
The Muses restrain love, Philippus –
and wisdom is the all-curing medicine for all things.
- This is theoretically an erotic and sympotic epigram, addressed to a Philippus (a friend of Callimachus?)
- The opening alludes to Theocritus 11, which also explicitly uses Polyphemus as a model; Callimachus' use of the Doric form of the name here confirms the reference
- The epigram uses generic settings to engage in literary commentary, confirming Callimachus' approval of Theocritus

Callimachus and Genre

- Callimachus 53:
 - Τὸν τὸ καλὸν μελανεῦντα Θεόκριτον, εἰ μὲν ἔμ' ἔχθει,
τετράκι μισοίης, εἰ δὲ φιλεῖ, φιλέοις·
ναιχὶ πρὸς εὐχαίτεω Γανυμήδεος, οὐράνιε Ζεῦ,
καὶ σύ ποτ' ἠράσθης—οὐκέτι μακρὰ λέγω.
 - Theocritus, whose cheeks are darkening finely – if he hates me,
may you hate him four times; if he loves, may you love him.
Yes, by fair-haired Ganymede, celestial Zeus,
you also once loved – I will say no more.
- This again appears to be a sympotic, erotic epigram (addressed to a typical male lover)
- Line 4 alludes to Theocritus 8.59-60, and indicates that the Theocritus of this poem is the author
- Again, literary approval is encoded into an otherwise generically typical epigram

Callimachus and Genre

- Callimachus 7:
 - Τοῦ Σαμίου πόνος εἰμὶ δόμῳ ποτὲ θεῖον ἀοιδὸν
δεξαμένου, κλείω δ' Εὐρυτον, ὅσσ' ἔπαθεν,
καὶ ξανθὴν Ἰόλειαν, Ὀμήρειον δὲ καλεῖμαι
γράμμα· Κρεωφύλῳ, Ζεῦ φίλε, τοῦτο μέγα.
 - I am the work of the Samian, who once welcomed the divine singer
in his home, and I celebrate Eurytus and what he suffered,
and blonde Iolia; but I am called a Homeric
text. For Creophylus, dear Zeus, this is great!
- This epigram is a puzzle, inviting the reader to identify it
- It takes the form of a dedicatory or sepulchral epigram, giving its 'father' and homeland, but refusing to divulge its name
- The punchline – that the actual father should be happy someone else gets the credit – is unexpected, and mocks the abilities of Creophylus, and the judgment of those who assign his poem to Homer

Callimachus and Genre

- Callimachus 10:
 - Μικρή τις, Διόνυσε, καλὰ πρήσσουντι ποιητῇ
ῥῆσις· ὁ μὲν “νικῶ” φησὶ τὸ μακρότατον,
ὧ δὲ σὺ μὴ πνεύσης ἐνδέξιός, ἦν τις ἔρηται
“πῶς ἔβαλες”; φησὶ “σκληρὰ τὰ γινόμενα.”
τῷ μερμηρίζαντι τὰ μὴ ’νδίκᾳ τοῦτο γένοιτο
τοῦπος· ἐμοὶ δ’, ὦναξ, ἢ βραχυσυλλαβίη.
 - Small, Dionysus, is the speech for the poet doing well: he says, at most, “I win”.
But the one on whom you don't breathe favourably, if someone asks “How's it going?”, he says “The things happening are bad”.
To the one who plans unjust things, may this be the word, but to me, lord, the monosyllable.
- The poem appears to be a mix of dedicatory (address to Dionysus) and sympotic (wine is clearly present)
- The epigram is too long – four lines is typical, and the final word is oxymoronic
- Callimachus desires brevity, but also innovates and stretches poetic conventions to get there

Callimachus and Genre

- Callimachus 29:
 - Ἡσιόδου τό τ' ἄεσμα καὶ ὁ τρόπος· οὐ τὸν ἀοιδὸν
ἔσχατον, ἀλλ' ὀκνέω μὴ τὸ μελιχρότατον
τῶν ἐπέων ὁ Σολεὺς ἀπεμάξατο· χαίρετε λεπτὰι
ῥήσιες, Ἀρήτου σύντονος ἀγρυπνίη.
 - Hesiod's is the song and the manner; and I think that not
the entire song, but only the most honey-sweet
of words the man of Soli has copied. Farewell graceful
passages, earnest vigil of Aratus.
- This poem strongly mimics sepulchral epigrams: the 'father' is named in line 1, the ethnicity in line 3, and the name in line 4
- The 'deceased' is in fact Aratus' *Phaenomena*; Callimachus' active presence in the epigram (speaking as first-person) emphasises his appreciation for this poem

Callimachus and Genre

- Callimachus 30:
 - Ἐχθαίρω τὸ ποίημα τὸ κυκλικόν, οὐδὲ κελεύθῳ
χαίρω τίς πολλοὺς ὧδε καὶ ὧδε φέρει,
μισῶ καὶ περίφοιτον ἐρώμενον, οὐδ' ἀπὸ κρήνης
πίνω· σικχαίνω πάντα τὰ δημόσια.
Λυσανίη, σὺ δὲ ναιχὶ καλὸς καλός—ἀλλὰ πρὶν εἰπεῖν
τοῦτο σαφῶς Ἦχώ, φησί τις “ἄλλος ἔχει.”
 - I hate the cyclic poem, nor do I enjoy the road
that carries many here and there.
And I detest the wandering lover, and not from his spring
do I drink; I loathe all things common.
Lysanias, you are fair, yes, fair – but before Echo says this
clearly, someone says: “Another has him”.
- The poem begins with a metaliterary comment before switching to sympotic subject-matter
- The two are clearly interlinked – Callimachus will only write and read poetry that had not been written/read by another
- The fusing of genre in epigram allows Callimachus to adopt and revolutionise traditional forms, casting his poetry as an erotic object of desire