The Ancient Greek Symposion as Space for Philosophical Discourse: Xenophanes and Criticism of the Poetic Tradition

Abstract

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The aim of the present article is to discuss relations between archaic Greek philosophy and poetry through the example of Xenophanes of Colophon (sixth century BCE), the poet best known for a critique of traditional religion using anthropomorphic imagery. The initial problem lies in understanding the performative aspect in Xenophanes’ elegiac poems; analysis of fragments 1W and 2W has revealed that his literary output can be situated within the framework of the aristocratic symposium. This sympotic context determines the second question: how the poetic fragments fit with those compositions in which Xenophanes attacks traditional beliefs and poetic ideas of Homer and Hesiod. As I suggest, the critique of traditional mythical narratives, and undermining other poets’ authority, can be interpreted as an expression of performative practices functioning at symposia of the archaic and classical epochs. By removing the division between “philosophy” and “poetry”, different aspects of Xenophanes’ fragments begin to coincide with the phenomenon of the ancient symposium, understood as a space for intellectual competition.

Keywords: elegy, Greek lyric poetry, oral tradition, criticism of religion, intertextuality

According to Plato, especially to the Republic’s third book, a common starting point for analyzing relations between ancient Greek philosophy and poetry, “the poetry seems to be an affront to the intellect [diánoia] of the audience lacking an antidote – a knowledge of how things truthfully are” (595b)¹. A single quotation taken completely out of context obviously cannot be used as an illustration of Plato’s general attitude towards poetry (or that of ancient Greeks); this brief passage, usually considered his firm stand against current poetic tradition, instead exemplifies the way in which the ancient quarrel

between philosophy and poetry is often given in publications in the present day. In accordance with this dominant model of interpretation, both types of discourse should be recognized as separate, mutually exclusive phenomena. Poetry at that time represented tradition, while philosophy was straining towards the future; poetry reflected ancient wisdom, unwritten moral laws, and old religious ideas, as philosophy tended to reject them; poetry was fundamentally irrational, dependent on a deity and drawn "from the mysterious source" achievable through myth and intimate union with the Muses, while "the road of philosophy" (Aristotle, Metaph. 982b5–15) was based on reason and rationally pursued wisdom.

Although it cannot be ruled out that this interpretation may be valid and adequate to the classical era, this does not mean that all poetry and philosophy in that world functioned separately as opposing, antagonistically driven forces by definition. In fact, in the case of archaic literature, we should reverse that picture instead: when examining the beginnings of philosophical reflection, we mainly deal with "doctrines and arguments in the form of poems", as Plutarch expressed it (De pythiae oraculis 18, 402 e6–11), that is, philosophy written through traditional verse measures, hexameter, and elegiac meter, filled with Homeric vocabulary and traditional poetic motifs.

This mutual permeation of both types of discourses or communication forms of in the sixth century BCE is well illustrated by the case of Xenophanes of Colophon, preserved fragments of whose writing can be found in collections of philosophical excerpts related to the pre-Socratics and in anthologies of archaic poetry. Some Xenophanes passages appear to represent the conventional sympotic elegy; see e.g. fr. 1W = B1 (DK), vv. 7–12 (Athenaeus 11, 462c):

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4 See Barfield, The Ancient Quarrel, 43.


In the midst frankincense gives forth its sacred scent,
and there is cold water, sweet and pure.
Golden loaves lie near at hand, and the noble table
is loaded down with cheese and rich honey.
An altar in the centre is covered all about with flowers
while song and festive spirit enfold the house […]7.

In other fragments we are dealing with a deliberate, decisive action against traditional
religious ideas and narratives, and against the great epic tradition, these old concepts and
imaginations’ vehicle; see for example fr. B 11 (DK):

Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods
all sorts of things which are matters of reproach and censure among men:
theft, adultery, and mutual deceit.
The classic question is: was Xenophanes a philosophical poet or a philosopher fol-
lowing existing poetic conventions? Of course, either possibility is based on the distinction
presented above and assumes that philosophy, unlike poetry constitutes a fundamentally
revolutionary, progressive, and anti-traditional phenomenon: the “form of man’s attempt
to free his mind from bondage to authority and guide himself by reason alone”, unavail-
able to “the poetic way of thinking”8. However, the Greeks’ approach to “traditional”
(nonphilosophical) religious attitudes did not only hold negative implications for the idea
of progress or for critical distance from lived role models: as Shaul Tor notes, criticism
can be inextricably linked with positive, creative tools of poetic expression9. Indeed, epic
poetry by Homer and Hesiod can be interpreted both as an illustration of the worldview
or religious ideas of ancient Greeks and as a conscious attempt to transform traditional
beliefs10.

In this article, I will discuss the central inquiry of this issue (Tekstualia 56/1, 2019),
relations between philosophy and poetry, by making an attempt to go back to a time
before this conceptual opposition was established, viz. to archaic Greece. Using poetic
translations of Xenophanes (here and below) by James H. Lesher, Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments (Tor-


Tor, Mortal and Divine, 2. Moreover, as is stressed by Richard P. Martin, “Hesiodic Theology”, in: The Oxford
Handbook of Hesiod, Alexander C. Loney and Stephen Scully (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 125,
poems attributed to Hesiod “are not ‘religious’ in the manner of the Bible” and “their representation of the world
of gods was not canonical”.

antiq_0770-2817_1983_num_52_1_2082; date of access: 6/08/2020), who persuasively argues regarding the strategy of heroization of Odysseus in the Odyssey that “[the epic] tradition can itself be held up for reflec-
tion, examination, criticism”. See also Joachim Latacz, Homer. Der erste Dichter des Abendlandes (München – Zürich: Artemis-Verlag, 1985), who presents interplay between Homer’s epic tradition and socioeconomic and cultural transformations that took place in Greece in the eight and seventh centuries BCE; through the framework presented there, the development of colonization (pp. 74–75) as well as the idea of Panhellenism, that is, of religiosity not limited to local myths and cults but based on common imaginations and concepts and on shared holidays or places of worship (76–77) fostered transmission of the epics, and were further stimulated by the Homeric tradition’s growing popularity.
fragments attributed to Xenophanes (570/560 – 478/467 BCE)\textsuperscript{11} as an example of that contemporary cultural context, I begin with a focus on certain elements and motifs that must have been traditional to the sympotic poetic genres, as well as on philosophical connotations and senses arising from the way in which the poet made use of these typical Leitmotive (inter alia on the issue of criticism of religion, the aspect that determines Xenophanes’ honorable place in the catalog of ancient philosophers). I will pay special attention to the phenomenon of the symposion\textsuperscript{12}, which as we will see is the basic setting for elegiac performance – and also, in my opinion, for Xenophanes fragments in which he engages in a polemic with traditional religious images in Homer and Hesiod.

The symposium as a space for transmitting the elegiac tradition: Xenophanes 1W

Archaic Greek elegy considered as a literary genre is characterized by a variety of themes and a multitude of stylistic and formal solutions: along with some truly severe pieces of poetry, which “are not dealing with any other [issue] than the nobility (aretê) or evil (kakia) inherent in human beings”\textsuperscript{13}, we find playful and erotic elegies, full of purely convivial themes and closely related to the ancient symposium (see e.g. vv. 531–534 of the collection known as Corpus Theognideum):

\begin{quote}
My heart is ever warmed within me
when I hear the delightful voice of the babbling flute
I rejoice to drink deep and sing to the pipes,
I rejoice to have in hand the tuneful lyre.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

This commonly acknowledged fact became the basis for spirited discussion on the unity and cohesion of elegy as a genre. Particular attention should be paid to the publication of Richard Reitzenstein, who around the start of the twentieth century attempted to justify the elegiac tradition’s thematic diversity\textsuperscript{15}. In Reitzenstein’s view, the seemingly contradictory discourses typical in this genre – moral, legal, erotic, educational, political, military, ludic or “recreational”, as appear through themes of banquet games, drinking wine, playing musical instruments, etc. – coexisted, connected by the common performative site, viz. the ceremony of the symposion.

\textsuperscript{11} On Xenophanes’s dates, see Douglas E. Gerber, A Companion to the Greek Lyric Poets (Leiden – New York – Köln: Brill, 1997), 129, and Lester, Xenophanes of Colophon, 3.

\textsuperscript{12} By the “symposium” (symposion) I understand, contrary to modern senses and connotations of the term, a special custom of feasting functioning in archaic and classical Greece among aristocrats; on the meaning of συμπόσιον, see Marek Węcowski, “Towards a definition of the symposion”, in: Ἐυεργεσίας χάριν. Studies Presented to Benedetto Bravo and Ewa Wipszycka by Their Disciples, Tomasz Derda et al. (Warsaw 2002), 337–61, also Marek Wecowski, The Rise of the Greek Aristocratic Banquet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), esp. 85–124.

\textsuperscript{13} Here I use the expression believed to have been written by Xenophon about Theognis’ poetry. Translation based on the edition of John M. Edmonds, Elegy and Iambus, vol. I (Cambridge, Mass.: William Heinemann Ltd, 1931) (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/, date of access: 20/07/2020).

\textsuperscript{14} English translation by John M. Edmonds, Elegy and Iambus. On the sympotic nature of this passage, see Fiona Hobden, The Symposion in Ancient Greek Society and Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 40.

A few years later Reitzenstein’s theory about the dominant role of symposia on the transmission of elegies gained the support of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff\textsuperscript{16}. Tracing the research’s further history, however, we notice that even such a respected philologist may not suffice to popularize some theories or interpretations. At least until the mid-1980s, in most studies the view prevailed that the sympotic context was not decisive for elegy as a poetic genre.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a methodological twist accompanied by reflections on elegy’s original meaning and role. Work by researchers such as Ewen Bowie\textsuperscript{17}, Massimo Vetta\textsuperscript{18}, and Krystyna Bartol\textsuperscript{19} cast doubts on classical testimonies and on later ones\textsuperscript{20}, and encouraged examination of the preserved elegiac poems from a new, performative-pragmatic point of view\textsuperscript{21} – taking into account performative dispositions, determined through the text itself and indicating its musical character (as in the passage mentioned above from \textit{Corpus Theognideum}), as well as series of allusions and references to aristocratic feasts and social principles. And although there is still significant debate among classical philologists as to whether elegy was a phenomenon related solely to the symposium, it is unanimously believed that it constituted the primary music-poetic genre of the archaic symposium\textsuperscript{22}.

Regarding Xenophanes’ relations with the convention of the symposion, it appears that the existence of the link between his poems and this phenomenon does not require proofs or sublime interpretative tools. It is enough to mention the fragment of 1W (partly cited above), which is actually one of the best literary sources for the reconstruction


\textsuperscript{20} Testimonia concerning the archaic elegy come mainly from postclassical times and are far from the source context of surviving poems: based on the generic classification developed post factum, when instead of oral performance, writing had become the primary and most common medium of the transmission of poetry. Consequently, with the evolution of Greek culture and the gradual disappearance of primary performative practices, the way of understanding the most important concepts in the field of poetry has also changed. Terms such as “iamb” and “elegy”, denoting both the metric features and the broader context of these genres, gradually come to signify only the form, that is, metric relations. See Bartol, \textit{Greek Elegy and Iambus}.

\textsuperscript{21} I am borrowing this term from Jerzy Danielewicz, \textit{Antologia liryki hellenistycznej} (Warsaw: PWN, 2018), 12–13; for a similar approach, see Felix Budelmann, “Introducing Greek Lyric”, in: \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Greek Lyric}, Felix Budelmann (Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009; DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521849449.001), 15.

\textsuperscript{22} However, since the mid-1980s publication of Bowie’s now-famous paper “Early Greek Elegy”, a discussion has been ongoing as to whether there was a separate subgenre of narrative (public) elegy: performed at Panhellenic festivals, musical agons, or religious events (cf. Ewen L. Bowie, “Cultic Contexts of Elegiac Performance”, in: \textit{Elegy and Iambus: New Approaches}, L. Swift, Ch. Carey (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15–32, (DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199689743.003.0002).
of the archaic feasts of noblemen. Some researchers, however, contrary to what is often suggested, interpret this elegy as a program of a philosophical “anti-symposium”, radically crossing the framework of the tradition of aristocratic feasts. I want to show that it is quite the opposite: the elegy fr. 1W, considered in isolation from later testimonies, consistently fits within the “mainstream” of convivial poetry. Instead of textual ambiguities suggesting the need to go beyond the context of a traditional symposium, we find a number of traditional motifs known to us from other preserved works of the genre. Note the first lines (1–6):

For now the floor is clean (katharón) as are the cups and hands of all.
One puts on the woven garlands;
another passes along a fragrant ointment in a bowl.
The mixing bowl stands full of cheer (méstōs euphorosúnēs)
and another wine, mild and flower fragrant in the jars, is at hand –
which says it never will give out.

The performative character of the elegy is confirmed not just by its subject matter: let us note that the first verse opens with a “deictic marker” – the phrase “now”, “so here” (vűn γὰρ δή, v. 1) – emphasizing the poem’s contextual nature. From the following stanzas we also learn that the house in which the feast is taking place is filled with music (v. 12), that no one will lack wine or food (5–6) – and it is only necessary to meet certain conditions, to fulfill the rules of the symposium (in the first place, to sing a song addressed to the gods, vv. 13–18):

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26 Vetta, Poesia simposiale, xlix, suggested that this place was the tyrant’s palace or the house of the poet’s patron.
But first glad-hearted men (eúphronas ándras) must (chrê) hymn the god with reverent words and pure speech (katharoïsi lógois).

And having poured a libation (speísantás) and prayed (euksaménous) to be able to do what is right – for these are obvious – it is not wrong to drink as much as allows any but an aged man to reach his home without a servant’s aid.

As Cecil Bowra has already pointed out, the elegy 1W is clearly divided into two parts: the first (vv. 1–12) is an enthusiastic description of the feast, the second (vv. 13–24) is a reflection on proper behavior during the symposium. This is where the two programmatic goals of sympotic elegy come together: to teach and to play. Moreover, both parts of the poem influence, complement, and clarify one another: some words used to describe the feast are repeated in the second part, for example the adjective “clean” (katharós, v. 1, 8, 14, in the second instance in the sense of moral purity and being free from guilt27). Interestingly, we find a similar motif in a couplet from Corpus Theognideum (vv. 197–198) that touches on the issue of wealth providentially redistributed among people, where the terms “justly” and “clean” are also used side by side28. Thus, the image of a feast prepared with exemplary care becomes a symbolic illustration of the proper attitude of those participating in the symposium29.

The second part of Xenophanes’ elegy is clear to interpret both on the level of ethics or practical philosophy, and also in the religious dimension. The recommendation that all statements made by symposium participants should be constructed with “pure words” (katharoïsi lógois) and “pious speech” (euphémonis múthois, v. 14) is indeed used in the context of praying to the gods, and “the opportunity of achieving righteous [things]” (tà díkaia dûnasthai prêsein, vv. 15–16) depends on the fulfillment of previous religious duties (mostly of libation and praying)30. Surprisingly, these two rituals already formed an integral part of the feast in the Odyssey: in the third book, for example, Nestor’s son Pisistratus, host of the feast at which Telemachus arrives, address one of the latter’s comrades (in fact he is speaking to Athena, accompanying Telemachus and traveling incognito in human form, vv. 43–47):

29 Bowra, Xenophanes, Fragment 1, 359.
30 Reitzenstein, Epigramm und Skolion, 50, indicates an analogous turn in the sympotic elegy of Ion, fr. 26W (vv. 15–16): “Hail [to Dionysus], give us time, / that we may drink, play, still devoted to our righteous thoughts (tà dikaia phroneîn)“. Cf. Hermann F. Fränkel, Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy, trans. by M. Haddas, J. Willis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), 327. Fränkel interprets these words as a command concerning the meaning of a prayer and the object of the request addressed to the deities.
Say a prayer to Lord Poseidon, stranger,
his is the feast (daítēs) you’ve found on your arrival.
But once you’ve made your libation (speiṣēis) and your prayer (eúkseai) –
all according to ancient custom (hē thēmis estī) – hand this cup
of hearty, seasoned wine to your comrade here
so he can pour forth too […]51.

The Odyssey creates an important contextual background for the interpretation
of the fr. 1W (see esp. v. 15). Structural and verbal parallels – the verbs spéndō,
“to compose libation”, and eúchomai, “to pray” – suggest that Xenophanes wants to
obey the same religious command (thēmis)32 that has been presented in the Homeric
epic (cf. Iliad I, 470–474), and most probably recognized and respected throughout
Greece during the archaic and classical epochs33.

To sum up, all prayers must be based on “a pure word” and a “respectable speech”.
This last motif is developed in the elegy’s final lines (19–24):
Praise the man who when he has taken drink (piṓn) brings noble (esthlá) deeds to light,
as memory (mnēmosúnē) and a striving for virtue (tónos amph’ aretēs) bring to him.
He deals (diépein) neither with the battles of Titans nor Giants
nor Centaurs, fictions of old,
nor furious conflicts – for there is no use (chrēstón) in these.
But it is good (agathēn) always to hold the gods (theōn) in high regard.

It is worth paying attention to the participle pión “having drunk” that appears
in verse 19 and to the temporal relation introduced by this form: the symposium is ongo-
ing and we are past the libation and the opening paean34. Important now is that drink-
ing should be accompanied by moderation, as Xenophanes emphasizes, and whoever
after drinking “is giving a noble speech (esthlá)” should be admired. This conventional

31 Translated by Robert Fagles (Homer, Odyssey, New York: Viking Press 1990, 108–109); Greek text according
32 For an introduction to the complex subject of themis in Homer, see Joanna Janiak, Terms of the Semantic
Sphere of δίκη and θέμις in the Early Greek Epic (Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 2003), and Carlo
On the ceremony of libation in Homer in the context of the symposium: Węcowski, The Rise of the Greek Aris-
tocratic Banquet, 203–211.
33 The custom of libation and singing paeans is attested in Plato’s Symposium (176a, cf. 174c) and by Xeno-
phon (Symposium 2.1–2). See also Ford, The Origins of Criticism, 57–60, who places the motif of prayers in the
context of “conventional aristocratic piety”.
34 Not all researchers are likely to agree with consequences stemming from the text: Mario Untersteiner
(Senofane. Testmonianze e Frammenti, Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1956, 104–105) proposed the conjuncture
ζηπίων (similarly in Marcovich, Xenophanes on Drinking-Parties, 19), while Fränkel, Early Greek Poetry and Phi-
losophy, 327, note 4, adopts the form ζηπών. However, as Ioannis Perisinakis notes (Ἀρχαϊκή λυρική ποίηση. Ἡθικές
αξίες και πολιτική συμπεριφορά στην αρχαία ελληνική λογοτεχνία, Αθήνα: Παπαδήμας Δημ., 2015, 489; see
also remarks in the GP edition), we have no reason to call into question the condition of the text, especially
since in the two preceding verses wine-drinking (ζηπίων, v. 17) is indicated as part of the symposium, cf. Corpus
Theognideum, vv. 757–64.
advice is then extended to include specific guidance about the content of words spoken (or recited) words, which interacts well with the critique of religious images of Homer and Hesiod (“fictions – πλάσματα – of ancestors”, v. 22) known from other Xenophanes passages (I will return to this thread).

As Marek Węcowski states, moral reflection is “obsessively” ubiquitous in sympotic elegy: a genre or type of poetry that constantly admonishes and gives instructions about what should (or rather what must) be avoided during a feast, warning against exceeding the limits in drinking wine, etc. The second part of the elegy 1W fits precisely into this stereotype: Xenophanes tries to convey both the conventionalized savoir-vivre, a code accepted and regarded as pious behavior during a feast (emphasized by the term “must”, v. 13), as well as broader moral values valid among the aristocracy (for example, by closing the elegy with a general gnomic instruction: “It is good always to hold the gods in high regard”, v. 24). For this reason, I cannot agree with researchers who read fr. 1W as the program of some “philosophical” feast. On the contrary, it is a refined example of symposium poetry, firmly rooted in traditional poetic conventions, dependent both on genre and stylistic standards of elegies, as well as on religious and social rules functioning at the symposium, which apparently does not diverge from the degree of “philosophicality” to which we have become accustomed while reading other elegiac traditions: for example, of Theognis, Phocylides (fr. 14 GP), or even Anacreon (fr. 2W).

To become an authority at the symposium? Xenophanes through the performative prism

As stated above, the recognition of the role of the symposium for the elegy as a genre is related to a broader methodological trend, initiated in the 1980s: the so-called performative-pragmatic turn, that is, a shift of focus from purely textological research to the analysis of the wider performance context. Among new contexts and interpretative problems until then previously overlooked, a special place has been given to the question of the relationship between an artist and his audience, as well as regarding the rhetorical dimension of archaic Greek poetry.

Within this new perspective, it has become obvious that the final shape of a poem that has primordially been transmitted orally was influenced both by its creator and

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35 Cf. Corpus Theognideum, vv. 479–483: “whereas someone [at the feast] overpasses the due measure of drinking is no longer master either of his tongue or his mind, he becomes abhorrent to sober ears, and is not ashamed of [what] he is doing while drinking. A wise man once, but now a fool”, translation (with changes) by J. M. Edmonds, op. cit.; see also e.g. Anacreon fr. 2W, Euenos 2W, Critias 6W (=4 GP), vv. 18–19.

36 As Peter Roth asserts, the verb διέπειν (v. 21) means here “recitation” (idem, “Διέπω bei Xenophanes”, Hermes 118 (1990), 118–121), however, the argumentation he presents can hardly be considered convincing, cf. Lesher, Xenophanes of Colophon, 49–50.


38 Cf. Phokylides, fr. 14 GP, Corpus Theognideum, vv. 563–564, 1356–1360. As Fiona Hobden notes, The Symposium, 27–28, the term γενόμενον, or “must”, when combined with the infinitives, constitutes a formula typical to the gnomic tradition and to the so-called hypothèkai; see also André Lardinois, “Modern paroemiology and the use of gnomai in Homer’s Iliad”, Classical Philology 92 (1997), esp. 215–216.

39 Ivana and Andrej Petrovic, Inner Purity and Pollution, 106: “we find a reference to ‘always’ (αἰένα), which relates immediately to this symposium, but which can also be taken as a general instruction for life”.

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by the audience before which its performance took place. At the same time, the poetic
I becomes more than just an exponent of a fixed system of values: a certain unique,
personalized voice of different symposiats emerged from tensions between common be-
liefs, certain ideas accepted as true within a particular community, and the speaker’s
individual perceptions. Therefore the performer – a professional singer, or aoidos, in-
vited to a symposium or a participant of a feast with appropriate competences and skills
– by presenting a poem in front of his listenership, shapes public opinion and affects the
involvement and the moral commitment of symposiasts.

The rhetorical dimension of archaic poetry harmonizes with the atmosphere
of the symposium, which is a special space for competition. As has often been empha-
sized, participants at the aristocratic symposium were constantly put to various chal-
lenges including through a number of intellectual and musical games and competitions
(as we read of in Aristophanes’ Waspos, v. 1209, singing to the accompaniment of a lyre
is what makes one a true sympotikós). Thus, the philosophical symposium presented
in dialogues of Xenophon and Plato, during which invited guests were in constant
competition with one another – by deliberating on the nature of beauty, the meaning
of philosophy or erotic love and so on – can be interpreted as a development (or reinter-
pretation) of themes fully embedded in aristocratic archaic culture. As Fiona Hobden
writes, since the beginning, participation in the symposium was an opportunity for the
most favored members of a feasting community to make known their views on a given
topic, including philosophical ones, as well as to claim to be an authority in their in-
tellectual and cultural environment. Furthermore, as Marek Węcowski states, during
the archaic feast:

[all types of sympotic performances] belonged to pairs, or to a longer series, of witty verbal
exchanges between members of the sympotic group. Even a virtuoso performance by a great lyric
poet present at a symposion, or the re-enactment of such a poem by a next-generation sympo-
ast, was not a self-contained artistic event, but a response and an invitation for another utterance
by fellow diners. A whole variety of sympotic themes applied here, from a metasympotic love-and-
wine discourse, political scheming, gossiping, even moralizing and philosophical debate, but all
this was an interactive situation that ideally required the constant attention and full involvement
of diners alert to the actual course of the symposion.

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40 See Odysseus Tsagarakis, Self-expression in Early Greek Lyric Elegiac and Iambic Poetry (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1977), 98–99. As Krystyna Bartol notes, Greek Elegy and Iambus, 60, even assuming that the character evoked
through apostrophic expressions was a historical one, in the case of re-performances, a given poem could have been
adapted to new performative circumstances and related to a different person, i.e., a participant of that symposion.
41 See Jeffrey Walker, Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 154–155, 250,
267–272, who presents poetry as the oldest type of rhetorical discourse and a conventionalized type or method
of argumentation in the public space in ancient Greece; also Perisinakis, ῥητορική λυρική ποίησις, 69–70.
42 Hobden, The Symposium, 249 and chapter 3 (“Politics in performance”); see also: Ford, The Origins
of Criticism, 25–45 and Derek Collins, Master of the Game: Competition and Performance in Greek Poetry
(Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2004), chapter 11: “the symposium is an arena for the display
of philosophical skill exemplified through competitive poetic performance” (https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/; date
of access: 1/08/2020).
A clear example of sympotic performative practices is a music game that, in a nutshell, consists of “picking up” verses of the song circulating among participants of the feast (see the parody of this custom in Aristophanes, Wasps 1222–1225, 1222–1249, 1299–1325[44]), sometimes, as we can suppose, in improvised form[45]. It is possible that this practice also took the form of poetic pranks and jokes (skóżmata), typical to the phenomenon of a symposium[46].

As for the speaker’s authority, this competitive aspect of the archaic feast interacts with the rhetorical tendency to emphasize one’s own competences (as has been highlighted above, and which appears in a wide variety of poetic traditions). For example, in the introduction to the collection of elegies Corpus Theognideum, the poetic I, Theognis of Megara, presents himself as a citizen who is “wise” (sophizoménôi [...] emoî, v. 19) and “well-thinking” (eû prôneôn, in 27) and who knows how to “offer good advice” (eû symbouleûin, v. 38) to friends. This peculiar self-presentation then becomes the starting point for moral instruction and didactic statements, which are justified by the authority of the poetic voice (and which in fact, as I have said, constitutes a construct of the collective and conventional “I” rather than of the historical figure)[47].

To return Xenophanes, who uses a similar rhetorical strategy: in the second fragment (2W), he attacks award winners in sport competitions and presents it as absurd that athletes are commonly held in high esteem (“not being as worthy of them [sc. honors] as I”, v. 11); at the same time, the poet exalts his “own” aristocratic wisdom (vv. 11–14):

For our expertise (sophíē) is better than the strength of men and horses. But this practice makes no sense nor is it right (oudê díkaion) to prefer strength to this good expertise (tês agathês sophíēs).

Sophíē, traditionally translated as “wisdom”, has a political significance here (it is emphasized by the fourfold repetition of polis, “city-state”, verses 9, 19, 20, 22):

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[44] See Aristophanes’ Clouds, vv. 1353–1379, where one character during the symposium asks his son to intone a passage from Simonides or Aeschylus, also fr. 235 PCG (quoted at Athenaeus 15.693f) from the inextant Banqueters of Aristophon, pointing to the practice of singing commonly known poems (in this case, Alcaeus and Anacreon) as a skolion. On the phenomenon of skolion, see Węcowski, The Rise of the Greek Aristocratic Banquet, 94–96, and Collins, Master of the Game, chapters 6 and 7; on the phrase δέχεσθαι τὰ σκόλια; on the phrase δέχεσθαι τὰ σκόλια in Aristoph. Vesp. 1208-1250”, Seminari romani di cultura greca 2 (1999), 243–262.


[46] On the self-creation of the poetic I as an authority, see the tradition of Hesiod with the commentary of Gregory Nagy, “Hesiod and the Poetics of Pan-Hellenism”, in: Greek Mythology and Poetics, Gregory Nagy (Ithaca – London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 36–82; Mark Griffith, “Contest and Contradiction in Early Greek Poetry”, in: The Cabinet of the Muses, Mark Griffith, Donald J. Mastronarde (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 185–220; cf. Tor, Mortal and Divine, 61–64, 72–76; moreover, the name around which a given poetic tradition is organized is often used to emphasize its superiority over other traditions, as it is illustrated by Hesiod, Theogn. 27–28 or the beginning of the Homeric “Hymn to Dionysus”, where other traditions related to the birthplace of that god are accredited. For further bibliography, see Rose, Sons of the Gods, 112–119.
only this type of sophiē, which characterizes the poet, can ensure the readiness to perform public functions (vv. 18–19). Here, to what extent the poetic I situates itself outside and above the milieu of aristocrats gathered at a feast is worth considering, and to what extent it speaks on behalf of all “noble” ones. Since it is using the phrase “noble wisdom” (the adjective agathós, “noble”, was closely attached in the elegiac tradition to the aristocracy and to the highest level of arcaic Grecian class structure), it seems that the poet’s voice speaks rather on behalf of the whole hetaireia, viz. the group of aristocrats. In other words, the “wisdom” of the poetic I, as it serves for the integration of the audience, is also offering praise for the whole group or class of aristocrats.

Moreover, the close connection of sophiē with political competences intersects with one more dimension of “poetic wisdom”. In poetry of that time, this term was often used to designate musical skills (e.g., Pindar, Pyth. VI, 49; Corpus Theognideum 789–794). Taking this semantic aspect into account, Xenophanes’ sophiē can also be understood as “rhetorical expertise” (as James Lesher expresses it in English), a special competence closely related to the convention of poetic agon and rivalry both between participants of symposium and public competitions. Previously, I juxtaposed Xenophanes with Theognidean tradition, and not without reason: in some studies we can read that he “for the first time in the development of [Greek] philosophical thought” emphasizes his own wisdom, independent of the Muses, and contrasts it with the opinions of the crowd; that he is the first to take a critical position towards predecessors and the existing religious and poetic tradition. However, in my view, the preserved sources contradict this idea: the poetic I in archaic (pre-philosophical) poetry – as far as we can identify this with the author of a given work – is aware of its own skills and values, is polemically oriented in facing other orators and poets, convinced that it (or the tradition associated with

48 Marcovich, Xenophanes on Drinking-Parties, 18–20; Perisinakis, Άρραβική ιερική ποίηση, 499–501; Tor, Mortal and Divine, 149; Wesoly, Elegie Ksenofanesa, 41–43. Many researchers, apart from the performative context of the fragment, understand the term sophiē as the ability to think critically or even to prove something in the theological or philosophical manner.

49 In light of sociopolitical meanings of the adjective agathós, the last verse of the 1W elegy also takes on a new meaning: prométhiēn [...] agathēn (v. 24) can be translated as “noble respect” or “the reputation that belongs to the noble [i.e., aristocrats]” (cf. prométhiē in Herodotus I, 88, also II, 172 and IX, 108; see also Plato’s Meno 318e-319a with an analogous phrase).


51 Janina Gajda-Krynicka, Filozofia przedplatanośń (Warsaw: PWN, 2007), 119–120: “What distinguishes Xenophanes from the crowd of ignorant men – or rather ‘fantasists’ [holders of false opinions] – is his wisdom, sophiē. For the first time in the development of philosophical thought we encounter an important juxtaposition of the ‘wise man’ and the crowd; we can find the same opposition in Heraclitus”. 
its name) is the sole purveyor of truth. Hence, belief a natural intention to teach and speak out publicly is not a characteristic feature of philosophical discourse, but instead is a conventional rhetoric strategy deeply rooted in archaic poetry.

In this performative perspective, taking into account the context of the symposium and of intellectual rivalry typical to the atmosphere of this feast, I propose reading those fragments of Xenophanes containing critical references to religious images of Homer and Hesiod.

**Critiquing the poetic tradition: Xenophanes in intertextual terms**

If the aristocratic symposium was an opportunity for someone to show their best side and express their own views, usually polemical with respect to the statements of another symposiast, and since poetry during symposia was used for the purpose of competition, sympotic poetry pursued the same goals at the level of poetic references, transcending a particular feast.

The elegy as a genre provides a number of examples of polemical intertextual (or rather “interperformative”) references between different traditions. A prime example is the repeated question “what is the best?” (τί κάλλιστον): in various elegiac traditions, this theme is approached in a different way, which creates an impression of some contest between individual artists or “poetic schools”, probably based on a sympotic game or convention. Thus, the critique of another poet constitutes a constant poetic topos taken up, for example, by Solon (fr. 20W = Diogenes Laertios I, 60), who in one elegy makes a critical allusion to Mimnermus (cf. fr. 6W):

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52 Archaic elegy’s dialogic (or agonistic) character is emphasized by the fact that this genre often uses second-person phrases: instructions to some “youth” (Kallinos fr. 1W, Tyrtaeus fr. 12W, along with the addresses to the boy Kynnos in Corpus Theognideum), other times invocations to some aristocrats (e.g., Archilochus and the turn to Pericles, 13 and 16W), and finally references addressed directly to other elegiac poets. Moreover, the creation of the poetic I as an elder aristocrat speaking to youth (vsapoí / νεοί) – the latter typically unable to assimilate the teachings – is a constant elegiac motive, see Richard Rawles, *Simonides the Poet: Intertextuality and Reception* (Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 123–129. The fragment of Xenophanes in which he emphasizes his own age (B8 DK = Diogenes Laertios IX, 19) can be interpreted as the implementation of this elegiac topos.

53 In view of the nature of poetic performance in the archaic epoch, the term “interperformative”, as it is argued by Power, *Literature in the Archaic Age*, 60, seems to be more appropriate than “intertextual”.


55 The question of what is best appeared at symposia as “a sympotic conversation-starter” (see Hayden Pelliccia, “The Interpretation of Iliad 6.145–9 and the Symptotic Contribution to Rhetoric”, *Colby Quarterly* 38/2 (2002), 210; open access: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq/vol38/iss2/8/, accessed on: 10/01/2019) or a kind of philosophical game “in which speakers were called on to declare what is finest, most important, or indeed worst for mortals” (see Ford, *Odysseus after Dinner*). One might push further and connect this sympotic or inter-performative game also with *Odyssey* IX, 11 (τούτῳ τί μοι κάλλιστον ἐνὶ ὕμων εἶχετα εἶναι), as Ford does.
But even if now you will listen to me, remove this – and do not be offended because my thoughts are better than yours – and changing it Ligyai-stades, sing as follows: “May my death come at eighty”\textsuperscript{56}.

Also Simonides of Ceos makes reference to the same poem: in the elegy 8W (= fr. 19 W²), he uses the motif associated with Mimnermus’ tradition (a reference to Homer, cf. \textit{Iliad} VI, 145–149), but he presents there, as noted by Richard Rawles, quite a different view (concerning the value of life in the face of death)\textsuperscript{57}.

As I wrote above in the introduction, the criticism of other poets, above all of Homer and Hesiod, is a feature of Xenophanes’ poems, which left a significant mark on their reception. In preserved fragments, mainly hexametric, he accuses the existing tradition of being naive, criticizes the anthropomorphization of deities – the fact that people perceive deities through the prism of themselves (B14, B15, B16, B23, B12)\textsuperscript{58}, and further, he makes the objection that in mythical narratives gods act immorally (B11\textsuperscript{59}). Contrary to conventional beliefs, intertextual allusions in his work are not limited to comments about the two oldest aoidoi: according to the commentary on Aristophanes’ \textit{Birds} (697c–e = fr. 21W), he also mocked the poet Simonides, calling him “a skinflint” (\textit{kímbix})\textsuperscript{60}. Plutarch (\textit{De vit. pud.} V, 530 E = A16 DK) mentions an anecdote according to which Xenophanes jokingly responded to an insult made by another poet, Lasus of Hermione. Similarly, it is said that he attacked Thales of Miletus, Epimenides, Pythagoras (A1 DK = Diogenes Laertios IX, 18), and even the followers of Dionysus (B17 DK)\textsuperscript{61}.

Regarding the last philosopher, thanks to Diogenes Laertios we have a passage in which

\textsuperscript{56} Translated by Douglas E. Gerber, \textit{Greek Elegiac Poetry: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries B.C.} (Cambridge, Mass. – London: Harvard University Press, 1999). As Christopher A. Faraone notes, \textit{The Stanzic Architecture of Early Greek Elegy} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 82–83, the scenario of the poetic exchange between Solon and Mimnermus is quite unlikely in the sixth century; more probable is that “famous songs like Mimnermus’ were repeated at symposia and that, when Solon made his famous rebuke, he was in fact responding on the spot to a version of the Mimnerman poem that had just been performed by a person at his side” (p. 83).

\textsuperscript{57} Rawles, \textit{Simonides the Poet}, 121–122. Simonides in his lyrics also refers to other poets: Pittacus of Mytilene (542.11–16 PMG), Homer, Stesichorus (564.4 PMG), and Cleobulus of Lindos (581 PMG). See also Cecil M. Bowra, “Simonides in the Theognidea”, \textit{The Classical Review} 48/1 (1934), 2–4, who is interpreting vv. 667–682 of \textit{Corpus Theognideum} (attributed by the researcher to Euenos of Paros) as a direct address to Simonides and the criticism of his reputed friendship with Themistocles.

\textsuperscript{58} B16 DK: “Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black; / Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired”; B15 DK: “But if horses or oxen or lions had hands / or could draw with their hands and accomplish such works as men / horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses, and the oxen as similar to oxen, / and they would make the bodies of the sort which each of them had”.

\textsuperscript{59} “Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods / all sorts of things which are matters of reproach and censure among men: / theft, adultery, and mutual deceit”.

\textsuperscript{60} Most researchers, perhaps too optimistically, regard this passage as authentic evidence, see, e.g., J. M. Bell, “


\textsuperscript{61} Ford, \textit{The Origins of Criticism}, 52, finds Plutarch’s testimony credible; similarly, Peter Steinmetz, \textit{Kleine Schriften} (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2000), 32: “So kann nicht ausgeschlossen werden, daß die Anekdote aus einem Gedicht des Xenophanes herausgesponnen worden ist.”
Xenophanes ironizes about the Pythagorean (?) belief in metempsychosis (B7 DK = 7 and 7aW)\(^62\):

> Now I will come to yet another account, and I will show the way.
> And they say that once as he was passing by a puppy being beaten,
> he felt compassion and said this:
> “Stop, don’t beat it, since in truth it is the soul of a friend which I
> recognized upon hearing it cry out”.

It is worth emphasizing that the poem is an elegy. Therefore, we can treat it as
a bridge between Xenophanes’ conventional sympotic work and his critical fragments,
mostly written in hexameter\(^63\). To focus on the first of the quoted poems: the phrase
“I will show the way” (deíksō dê kéléuthon), as Shaul Tor notes, may be a parody
of rhetorical program, developed in the environment that Xenophanes criticizes here\(^64\).
The phrase nûn aûte, “so again”, is also significant, indicating a certain repetition in-
herent in the structure of the elegy\(^65\). Diogenes Laertios mentions a Xenophanes work,
“Silloî”, or “The Mockeries” (A22 DK). If the poet did write a unitary book consisting
of mockery, this elegy, as well as the rest of the critical passages (B11–22), probably
formed part of it\(^66\). In addition, we cannot exclude the possibility that various mocking
works of Xenophanes were gathered into one work in later times (as with the collection
Syllòi, for example, in the later satirical work of Timon of Phlius): in each case, the com-
municative dimension and the wider performative context relating to all these fragments
merits attention.

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The backdrop I have indicated plays a key role in understanding the form and func-
tion of fr. B11–22 of Xenophanes: the symposium, along with jabs and jokes exchanged
between symposiasts, poetic contests, etc. Within the presented framework, the criticism
of traditional mythical narratives (Homer, Hesiod), along with challenging the authority
of other poets and thinkers, can be interpreted as an expression of concern for “piety”
and as proper behavior of the participants of the feast\(^67\), as well as a reflection of per-
formative practices functioning at the symposium as the archaic and classical epochs
met.

\(^{62}\) Wesoly, Elegie Ksenofanesa, 35, reads this fragment as an expression of Xenophanes’ sympathy for the idea

\(^{63}\) Some assume a radical disconnect between the elegiac fragments of Xenophanes and his “critical and philo-
osophical” hexametric works, see, e.g., Reitzenstein, Epigramm und Skolion, 50.

\(^{64}\) Tor, Mortal and Divine, 152–153.

\(^{65}\) Collins, Master of the Game, chapter 11, recognizes a common epic formula constantly repeated in Homeric
hymns.

\(^{66}\) See the discussion in Gerber, A Companion to the Greek Lyric Poets, 130–131. On the meaning and place-
ment of the title Σίλλοι: Dee L. Clayman, Timon of Phlius. Pyrrhonism into Poetry (Berlin – New York: de Gruyter,
2009), 77.

\(^{67}\) I will not discuss the complex issue of knowledge about gods in Xenophanes, and relations between the divine
and human spheres in the preserved fragments (especially B18, B34–36). Many works take up this subject; see,
e.g., Tor, Mortal and Divine, esp. 116–154.
As we have seen, for the moral reflection presented in fr. 1, the key theme is standards of proper behavior during the symposium. The elegy’s religious overtone seems as important as its socio-ethical dimension: the poetic I indicates the obligation of offering libations and praying to the deities before drinking – two commands that already function as themis, an unwritten law, in the Homeric tradition. Xenophanes’ attention is also focused on the form and content of the paean: prayer should be “reverent words and pure speech”, and it should only concern righteous things. Moreover, one should maintain seriousness in the manner of speaking about the gods during the initial prayers and also while drinking wine (vv. 19–20, 24). This instruction, as I have attempted to show, is firmly rooted in the traditional elegiac convention, eagerly engaging in “metasympotic” reflection on what “must” (the verb chre, v. 12) and on what should not be done and declared at symposia. The confidence with which Xenophanes undermines “the inventions of the older [authors]” (v. 22) is also nothing new, corresponding to generic convention and the strategy of self-creation of the poetic I (the motif of sophié) established already in Hesiod; this competitive aspect, ubiquitous at the symposium, may also be found in many sympotic poems.

Despite all these arguments, I do not mean to say that Xenophanes’ poems don’t deserve to be called “philosophical”. On the contrary: I agree with those who see the Xenophanes’ criticism of anthropomorphism and immorality as inscribed in Homeric imaginations about gods as an incentive to the development of philosophical theology or even atheistic views. What the preserved poems are indicating is the incompatibility of the opposition poetry-philosophy with performative practices of the archaic era – thus also the need to take into account the phenomenon of symposium when considering the intellectual debate of those times. The example he provides illustrates that these types of discourse were not mutually exclusive: instead, poetry in the archaic epoch was an obvious medium of communication and of philosophical ideas, entangled in generic norms and poetic conventions, conducive to rhetorical rivalry that was typical of the aristocratic culture of symposia.

This text is a translation of an article previously published as “Grecki symposion jako przestrzeń dyskursu filozoficznego: Ksenofanes i krytyka tradycji poetyckiej”, in Tekstualia 56/1 (2019), 35–52 (improved at certain points and complemented by several bibliographical references); that issue had focused on relations between philosophy and poetry. I would like to thank the editorial board members of Tekstualia for the careful proofreading of a draft of this manuscript.

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68 Especially if we agree with Marek Winiarczyk, “Methodisches zum antiken Atheismus”, Rheinisches Museum für Philologie 133/1 (1990), 1–6, according to whom the phenomenon of atheism in ancient Greece should be interpreted as an endeavor to transform popular religious beliefs rather than a radical rejection of the whole sphere of “divinity”.
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