

Hesiod's *Theogony*: Reading the Proem as a Priamel

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IT SEEMS not to have been noticed that the proem to the *Theogony* accommodates in form to a priamel. The term “priamel” is not ancient, but a German coinage from *praeambulum* used in modern scholarship (following Dornseiff and H. Fränkel) to describe a now well-documented informing structure in archaic literary composition.¹ The most cited paradigm of a priamel is the start of Sappho 16 (“Some say that the most beautiful thing on the dark earth is a host of horsemen; some, men marching; some would say ships; but I say she whom one loves”), but the figure appears in diverse forms in archaic poetry and beyond.² In this figure, a series of statements (often examples) are advanced only to be ultimately set aside in favor of a culminating statement (the superlative example). In Bundy’s formulation, “The priamel is a focusing or selecting device in which one or more terms serve as foil for the point of particular interest.”³ The precise contours of the

¹ Franz Dornseiff, *Pindars Stil* (Berlin 1921) 97–102; Hermann Fränkel, “Eine Stileigenheit der frühgriechischen Literatur,” *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denkens*² (Munich 1960) 40–96 (first published *NAKG* 1924). On the history of the term and its introduction into classical studies, see William H. Race, *The Classical Priamel from Homer to Boethius* (Leiden 1982) 1–7.

² Race, *Classical Priamel*, is the most thorough study; ironically, the only archaic poet in whom he finds the priamel lacking is Hesiod.

³ Elroy L. Bundy, *Studia Pindarica* (Berkeley 1962) 5. Cf. the definition of Eduard Fraenkel: “a series of detached statements which through contrast or comparison lead up to the idea with which the speaker is primarily concerned” (*Aeschylus: Agamemnon* [Oxford 1950] II 407–408 n.3, quoted in Race, *Classical Priamel* 9, along with other attempts at definition). The closest Race comes to a succinct definition is “<a rhetorical> form in which multiple examples lead up to, or introduce (= *praeambulum*) a particular topic”

priamel have been variously described, but essential are (1) a series of foils which (2) serve both to introduce and to focus attention upon (3) the climax, that is, the point of interest to which this all tends.

In the long proem to *Theogony* (1–115), the narrator raises now one possibility, and now another, and now a third, for how to organize a theogonic catalogue (11–21, 43–52, 104–115); these are ultimately set aside in favor of the Catalogue itself (116 ff.). The fact that none of the three theogonic programs in the proem match each other—and none exactly matches the actual catalogue of the *Theogony* either⁴—has created considerable confusion for modern readers. The hypothesis here is that an archaic audience, more in tune with the rhythms of the conceit now known as the priamel, would have recognized the three introductory paradigms of catalogue not as second thoughts or backtracking, but as a trio of foils that serve to introduce the topic—the catalogue of gods and their coming-to-being—and lead up to the climax—the catalogue proper. I have written that the proem “accommodates to the form of a priamel” because the structure is unusually extended and includes important intervening material. This is not a priamel in the compact sense of Sappho 16. Yet I think that the figure is recognizable; and we find a good parallel in the “elaborate priamel that shapes the so-called Mythological Prologue” in Herodotus’ *Histories* (1.1–5).⁵ We need to be clear that what

(17). The *Theogony* proem satisfies all five of the formal elements of priamel in Race’s elaborated definition at p.13; see below on the “capping particle” and the use of superlative.

⁴ The third paradigm comes close, but (*pace* Richard Hamilton, *The Architecture of Hesiodic Poetry* [Baltimore 1989] 14–15) is hardly an accurate synopsis of what is to come. Most obviously, the catalogue diverges at the point from which it starts (*Chaos*).

⁵ John Herington, “The Poem of Herodotus,” *Arion* SER. III 1.3 (1991) 5–16, at 6. The identification of the Herodotean priamel was first made in Race, *Classical Priamel* 111 (“Although it is more diffuse than its poetic prototypes, the opening of Herodotus’ *Histories* (1–5) is in the form of a priamel along the lines of *Hymn.Hom.* 1.1–6 and Sappho fr. 16: οἱ μὲν ... οἱ δὲ ... ἐγὼ δὲ, where the opinions of others are presented only to be rejected *en masse* by the new approach offered by the writer”). My thanks to the *GRBS* referee for drawing this parallel to my attention.

we seek to recover is that set of conventions, often unconscious, shared between audience and poet and informing the archaic response to the poetry. If the priamel analysis is correct, we see at once not one but two typical features of archaic parataxis in the proem: first, the use of foils to direct attention to the point of interest (i.e., the priamel itself), and second, the repeated return by the poet to the central theme (how best to organize the catalogue, and where to start) after exploration of intervening material.⁶

The narrator of the proem begins with the Heliconian Muses, and the first catalogue of gods is that reportedly sung by them: they sing “of aegis-bearing Zeus, and queenly Hera of Argos, who steps in golden sandals,” and of Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Poseidon, Themis (Justice), Aphrodite, Hebe (Youth), Dione, Leto, Iapetus, Cronus, Eos (Dawn), Helius (Sun), Selene (Moon), Earth, Ocean, Night, “and the holy race of the other immortals who always are” (11–21). The initial catalogic idea is, clearly, to start with Zeus and Hera and the Olympians, then to work back to the Titans and to the elemental forces of nature. But that paradigm is implicitly set aside as the narrator puts forth (after the investiture) a second possibility, that reportedly sung by, now, the Olympian Muses: these Muses “glorify in their song first the venerated race of the gods from the beginning, those to whom Earth and broad Sky gave birth, and those who were born from these, the gods givers of good things: second, then, ... Zeus, the father of gods and men, how much he is the best of the gods and the greatest in supremacy; and then, ... the race of human beings and of the mighty Giants” (44–50). Here the informing principle is to start with Earth and Heaven and their descendants, then to focus on Zeus, and finally on mortals. Yet a third paradigm is advanced at the end of the proem (104–115, again with intervening material). Here in the mode of invocation the Muses are summoned: “Glorify the sacred race of the immortals who always are, those who were born from Earth and starry Sky, and from dark Night, and those whom salty Pontus (Sea) nourished. Tell

⁶ Often referred to as a “spiral” structure. See William G. Thalmann, *Conventions of Form and Thought in Early Greek Epic Poetry* (Baltimore 1984) 22.

how in the first place gods and earth were born, and rivers and the boundless sea seething with its swell, and the shining stars and the broad sky above, and those who were born from them ...; and how they divided their wealth and distributed their honors, and also how they first took possession of many-folded Olympus. These things tell me from the beginning, Muses who have your mansions on Olympus, and tell which one of them was born first" (105–115).⁷ This paradigm will be recognized as a permutation of the last, still beginning with the coupling of Heaven and Earth but trying differently to solve the implicit question of how to organize and contain the great number and variety of divinity. None of these paradigms is what the Catalogue proper presents. Instead of the (traditional?)⁸ coupling of Heaven and Earth, the Catalogue begins, brilliantly, with *Chaos*.⁹ As we expect, the preeminent possibility—the best way to organize the catalogue and to define that stuff from which divinity arose—is signaled with a strongly marked word of contrast, ἦτοι, “but truly,”¹⁰ along with the superlative, πρῶτιστα.¹¹

What seems to some modern readers a baffling repetition and inconsistency in setting forth the program—a reading which has led to a variety of speculations on accretion and mode of composition¹²—was likely apprehended by the ancient

⁷ Translation here and elsewhere after Glenn Most (Loeb).

⁸ See M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford 1997) 282, on parallels with the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, which begins with a similar primordial coupling.

⁹ For the ways that *Chaos* functions in *Theogony*, with review of earlier scholarship, see R. Mondi, “ΧΑΟΣ and the Hesiodic Cosmogony,” *HSCP* 92 (1989) 1–41, at 1–4.

¹⁰ A particle is the usual way in Greek to signal “the cardinal point in a priamel at which the background (*Hintergrund*, general context, foil) gives way to (focuses on, culminates in) the point of interest (*Schlußpointe*, cap)”: Race, *Classical Priamel* 14.

¹¹ Echoing and answering ἐξ ἀρχῆς ... πρῶτον in 115 (end of third program) and πρῶτον ... ἐξ ἀρχῆς in 44 (start of second program, with πρῶτον doing double duty). The use of a superlative is also a normal (though not indispensable) part of signaling the climax: Race, *Classical Priamel* 15.

¹² See M. L. West, *Hesiod: Theogony* (Oxford 1966) 151.

audience as the usual parade of exemplary statements successively set aside in favor of the best statement (in this case, the best way of beginning and circumscribing the catalogue). Apprehended in this way, the skeletal structure of the proem is easily followed, the central function of the proem as a preamble is clear, and the remarkable opening of the Catalogue itself is dramatically, emphatically called to the audience's attention.

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