

BMCR 2022.12.16

La poesía popular griega: estudio y texto

Francisca Pordomingo, *La poesía popular griega: estudio y texto. Syncrisis, 5*. Rome: Fabrizio Serra, 2022. Pp. 312. ISBN 9788833153704 €84.00.

Review by

Tommaso Braccini, University of Siena. tommaso.braccini@unisi.it

The diverse and in many ways problematic and “artificial” corpus of the so-called Greek *Carmina popularia* continues to attract attention, and the past two years have seen the publication of two prominent contributions. The first, in order of time, was Malcom Davies’ *Lesser and Anonymous Fragments of Greek Lyric Poetry: a Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2021), which deals with “popular’ poetry” on pages 165-211. The second is the book reviewed here (which unfortunately could not take into account the previous one).

Pordomingo has been dealing with the corpus of *Carmina popularia* for about fifty years, and the work in question is, in a sense, the *summa* of her very long research in the field. The introductory pages provide the basic coordinates that frame “Greek folk poetry” and the author’s “rules of engagement.” First, she highlights the folkloric (thus mostly anonymous and traditional) nature of these materials, which has often made particularly tricky and difficult their passage onto the written page. Even when this material finally managed to land in papyrus scrolls or manuscript pages, its very nature has hindered its preservation and transmission. It is precisely the identification of the folkloric nature of these poetic remains (of which a history of studies beginning with Bergk’s collection is also provided) that allows comparisons to be established with similar modern and contemporary material. Pordomingo makes use mainly of Hispanic and Germanic examples, but in more than one instance she also mentions collections of Neo-Greek folk songs. Without forgetting the bidirectional osmosis that can occur (even at the metrical level) between literary and “folk” materials, the author enucleates the characteristic traits of “folk” style: basic simplicity, presence of parallelisms and reiterations, absence of purely ornamental adjectives. These are certainly, she concedes, traits that can be imitated by learned poets (such as Theocritus and Bion) who wish to exhibit a “folksy” style. Moreover, Pordomingo notes how the framing of *Carmina popularia* as folkloric texts has significant implications from an editor’s perspective as well. Indeed, on the one hand, knowledge of folklore style and conventions can lead to precise textual choices; on the other, manuscript variants might reflect the diversity of different oral versions spread synchronically and diachronically. Indeed, this is a very

sensible approach that takes into account the particular modalities of fixation and transmission of folk texts, “living texts” marked by an open and “characterizing” tradition. The awareness of another peculiarity of folk compositions, their close connection to a specific function, has guided the organization of the chapters.

Immediately after the comprehensive bibliography, the material is broken down into ten “functional” sections, each opened by its own introduction. Within these sections, 48 texts are analyzed and commented, which is 11 more than in the *Carmina popularia* section in Page’s *Poetae melici Graeci* (847-883; for correspondences see “Tabla de concordancias” on p. 277-278).

Regarding this increase, it is fair to say that not everyone, including the present writer, will always agree with the label of “folk poetry” applied to Pordomingo’s new entries (nor to the texts already surveyed by Page). This is not, in any case, the place to discuss in detail the folkloric relevance of individual passages. What can be said is that the reader is enabled fully to form a well-informed opinion about each one of the *carmina*. In all cases, the Greek text is followed by Spanish translation, critical apparatus, prospectus of previous editions, and then the commentary proper. This is usually thorough and consists of various sections (some recur all the time, others only when necessary) marked by a number, dealing with sources (1), ecdotic arrangement (2), exegesis (3), genre (4), metrics (5), style (6) and dialectal elements (7).

The first chapter deals with religious poetry related to divine worship: invocations, ritual formulas, prayers, hymns. The second chapter, which does not contain any detailed analysis, briefly discusses (p. 109-117) some hymns dedicated to leaders or rulers (Lysander, Demetrius Poliorcetes, Titus Quintius Flamininus, Seleucus). In the past, some have included them among the *Carmina popularia*, but the author has a point in asserting that they actually have no citizenship there. After the very brief third chapter devoted to a triumphal acclamation in honor of Aristomenes reported by Pausanias (4.16.6), we turn to the wedding songs. Particularly relevant is the famous and enigmatic reference to the crow (16, *PMG* 881b), about which the proverbial rivers of ink have been spilled, often in a vain attempt to “arrive at an authentic reconstruction” (p. 131). This is one of the cases where textual variants might actually reflect different versions of the exclamation in question. Discussing the very short text 17 (*PMG* 881a), the author usefully reflects on two genres of epithalamium, linked to a very specific functionality, attested in antiquity: *katakoimetikon*, which accompanied the wedding night, and *diegertikon*, the morning-after song for the newlyweds’ awakening. The fifth chapter is devoted to materials that accompanied rituals linked to the cycle of the seasons (such as those related to Linus and Bormus); the sixth includes a folkloric genre that is also widespread in modern and contemporary times, songs accompanying quests (*cantos de cuestación*). In the seventh chapter, devoted to love songs, Pordomingo provides a reasoned taxonomy of this genre (p. 190-201). Generally attributed to a female speaker are songs related to the amorous encounter (including *albadas* such as the famous “Locrian song”, 28 = *PMG* 853); to the waiting for the beloved; and to the pains of love. Linked to a male speaker, on the other hand, is the *paraklausithyron*; finally, there are dialogues and contrasts between lovers or rivals in

love. Not all of them can claim extant folkloric examples, but the author attempts to trace folkloric elements that have converged or echoed in ancient literary compositions. The eighth chapter is devoted to songs related to dances, including the famous *anthema* (31, *PMG* 852), while the ninth collects “work songs,” classified with characteristic meticulousness on the basis of ancient evidence. Curiously enough, *baukalemata*, lullabies, also appear among them (p. 242-243). Finally, the tenth chapter is devoted to childhood songs, often linked to specific games, many of which are attested by Pollux’s *Onomasticon*. This section, maybe a bit thin compared to others, would perhaps have benefited from the perusal of S. Costanza, *Giulio Polluce, Onomasticon: excerpta de ludis (Materiali per la storia del gioco nel mondo greco-romano, Alessandria 2019)*. As for text 41 (*PMG* 875), related to the game called *chytrinda*, the assumption that the mention of Midas is a euphemism for “donkey” is interesting. The author states that “the connection escapes us,” but it suffices to think of the well-known story of King Midas being punished by Apollo with two donkey ears (see for example Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.178-179). The next-to-last text (47, *PMG* 861), transmitted by Hesychius, is said to derive from a Tarentine game and refers to a “lame kid (*tragiskos*).” It has been assumed that there is an allusion here to a child who had to chase his companions by jumping on one leg; indeed, it may be remembered that this method of locomotion is still called, especially in infantile contexts, “andare a zoppo becco” (“going like a lame goat”) in some parts of Tuscany.

The book concludes with a series of tables and indexes: of meters, concordances, folk songs, quoted passages, ancient names and themes, and of selected Greek terms.

The merits of this volume are many. The food for thought, insights, and excellent contextualizations offered by Pordomingo’s very rich and analytical commentary are unparalleled, all the more so when one takes into account that they are devoted to texts that are often neglected or deemed worthy of only cursory attention, at best. Among the many points to which the author rightly draws attention is the need not to forcibly normalize, Procrustes-like, folkloric or “popular” texts, on the basis of patterns of regularity that do not belong to them. Their meter, language and style were not necessarily the same as those of the compositions of high literature, and since these were folkloric materials, the search for an Urtext might be methodologically erroneous. The oral transmission to which these materials were subjected may have involved the dissemination, in various places and eras, of multiple versions, each of them with its synchronic and diachronic “irregularities” with respect to the others. And yet each one of them was valid and perfectly functional in the context in which it was active, and from which it may have been drawn by grammarians and scholars who transferred it to the written page. The same applies to the search at all costs for rational meaning. Of course, it is not always easy to break away from the fetters of a “canonical” and reassuring approach. The problem is that an approach like this is calibrated to properly literary texts, and therefore may not be a valid tool for materials that do not belong to that category. The author herself, dealing with children’s ditties, and in particular No. 44 (*PMG* 876c), is confronted with the apparent lack of logical connections between the verses related to the game of *chelichelone* (p. 268). Although tempted, in the end she

does not fully feel up to admitting that these might ultimately be meaningless phrases, perhaps linked to specific movements of the players rather than to an overall message. Yet, no matter how intimately unsatisfying to an exegete, this might be just the right solution, as a comparison with a great many childish nursery rhymes shows. On the other hand, perhaps greater caution would have been preferable on the author's part in the repeated use of the tricky concept of "primitive" (see, for instance, p. 140, 150 and *passim*). This may be the result of the book's long sedimentation, which began when this notion was perhaps less problematic than it is now.

The *mise en page* of the book is very elegant, consistent with the criteria of the series, although a slightly larger font size would perhaps have made it easier to read. There are a few physiological typos, generally immediately noticeable and not particularly problematic.^[1] A more substantial question, however, is the use of Naber's old edition of Photius' *Lexicon*. The latter is an important source for texts 8 (*PMG* 883) and 18 (*PMG* 855). Theodoridis' edition is never mentioned, and thus the author proves unable to take advantage of the superior text and other scholarly materials it offers. Particularly in the case of text 18, the use of an outdated edition is compounded by its misunderstanding. In transcribing the lemma ἔφυγον κακόν, εὔρον ἄμεινον from Naber (*Photii patriarchae lexicon*, I, Leidae 1864, p. 238) the author mistook the stigma (ς), used—admittedly, in an antiquated way—to mean στ, for a misplaced word-final sigma (ς). And so, on p. 135 we find ἐσεμμένον and βασάζοντα instead of ἐστεμμένον and βαστάζοντα.

Such issues, however, which are minor, do not detract from the overall merit of *La poesía popular griega*. Pordomingo's book, the crowning achievement of a decades-long study of these texts, will be the indispensable starting point for any future research on Greek folk poetry.

Notes

^[1] See for instance p. 19 l. 22 δημωδή (*lege* δημώδη); p. 28, l. 12 intelletuale (*lege* intellettuale); p. 51, s.v. Fehling, *Grebrauch* (*lege* Gebrauch); p. 53, s.v. Lelli, E., "Lettura folklorica...", 1915 stands for 2015; p. 55, s.v. Perrota (*lege* Perrotta); p. 89, l. 7 πειερχομένων (*lege* περιερχομένων); p. 139, note 7 l. 10 como (*lege* come); p. 190, note 5, l. 8 Exempi (*lege* Esempli). More annoying is the editorial oversight on p. 151, l. 28, where there is an unresolved cross-reference ("p. 00").