

A R I S T O T L E

A S

P O E T



THE SONG FOR HERMIAS
AND ITS CONTEXTS

A N D R E W F O R D

ARISTOTLE
AS POET

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ARISTOTLE AS POET

*The Song for Hermias and
Its Contexts*

Andrew Ford

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For Annabelle and Viviane

quand j'ai été père . . . —Balzac

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CONTENTS

Abbreviations	xix
1. The Text	1
Aristotle: The Song for Hermias	1
Sources and First Reading	3
2. History and Context	9
Deconstructing Atarneus: Questions of Method	10
Constructing Hermias: The Erythraean Inscription	17
The End of Hermias: Theopompus's <i>Letter to Philip</i>	21
3. Performance and Occasion	27
Commemorative Epigrams: Aristotle and Simonides	29
Book Epigrams: Theocritus of Chios	35
Texts and Things: Herodotus on Hermotimus	41
4. Performance and Context	45
Witnesses: Callisthenes' <i>Hermias</i>	48

Sources: Hermippus's <i>On Aristotle</i>	54
Authenticity: "Aristotle's" <i>Apology</i>	60
5. Genres of Poetry	69
Lyric Genres from Plato to Alexandria	71
Impious Song: The Paean to Lysander	80
Paean, Hymn, <i>Skolion</i> ?	86
6. Kinds of Hymn	91
Hymnic Form: Ariphron's Paean to Health	91
Hymnic Flexibility: Pindar's Fourteenth Olympic Ode	97
Hymns in Hexameters: "Homer" and Aristotle	105
7. Ethos	113
Ethos in Debate: An Attic <i>Skolion</i> and a Poem by Sappho	114
Ethos in Protreptic: Aristotle's Hymn to Hermias, vv. 1–8	121
Ethos in Epiphany: Immortal Virtue in Sophocles' <i>Philoctetes</i>	127
8. Reading	137
Troping: πολύμοχθος in Euripides and Bacchylides	138
Mythologizing: Hymn to Hermias, vv. 9–16	144
Immortalizing: Hymn to Hermias, vv. 17–21	147
9. Endurance	157
Memorial: Aristotle's Elegiacs to Eudemus	160
Survival: A Letter from Plato	166
NOTES	173
BIBLIOGRAPHY	217
GENERAL INDEX	233
INDEX OF PASSAGES DISCUSSED	239

P R E F A C E

People are often surprised to hear that Aristotle wrote poetry, naturally thinking of him in the first instance as a philosopher and indeed as one of the greatest thinkers in the ancient world. In fact, Aristotle composed enough poetry to fill two papyrus rolls in the ancient collections of his works, for it was not unusual that a well-educated gentleman of his day should be able to come up with a verse or song to grace special occasions. What is very surprising is the story told about one of his poems, for the sources that preserve the text also tell us that it came near to costing the philosopher his life. This lyric, one of only two to survive complete, will be the central thread in the study that follows, which combines a close reading of that work with an attempt to understand its remarkable reception. Though very little of Aristotle's poetic output survives, I hope thereby to cast further light on his relation to the Greek lyric tradition and to the musical culture of the later fourth century.

The poem—strictly speaking, the lyric to a brief song—commemorates Hermias of Atarneus, ruler of a small principality in the northeast corner of the Aegean. In the late 340s BCE,

Hermias, who had been Aristotle's student, patron, and father-in-law, became entangled in the tensions between the Persian Empire to his east and a rising Macedon to his west. When Hermias was captured by the Persian king and put to death around 341, Aristotle composed an ode in praise of his friend's character. My original aim had been to call attention to this text, which is relatively little discussed today, and to place it within the Greek literary tradition. This I have done mainly in the latter part of the book. But my project expanded as I found myself drawn into a very old debate about which genre the poem belonged to: strictly speaking, was this a dirge for Hermias, a eulogy, a hymn, a drinking song, or some combination of these? The question may sound academic, except that it seems to have meant enough to some of Aristotle's contemporaries that they were willing to threaten him with trial and execution on account of it. This episode is usually thought to have occurred after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE when a wave of anti-Macedonian sentiment swept through Greece. In Athens, where Aristotle was teaching, his long-standing relations with the regime (his father had been the physician of Alexander's grandfather and he himself had been the young king's tutor) would have been a liability. Political agitators, we are told, began to accuse the foreign-born philosopher (from Stagira in northern Greece) of being too sympathetic to tyrants, and the song for Hermias was brought forth as a prime piece of evidence. According to the version preserved in Athenaeus (who wrote around five centuries after the event), a religious official of Demeter's Eleusinian mysteries teamed up with an Athenian politician to charge that Aristotle's song, ostensibly a lament for his friend, was actually a kind of hymn implying that Hermias had become a god. This was impiety in itself, the priest might urge, and the politician could add that such a song revealed a person unsympathetic to Athenian ideals of democratic equality. Both could buttress their case by recalling

the trial of Socrates, who had been put to death on charges that included impiety in 399. We are not told whether the case against Aristotle ever came to trial, but it seems that the threat of legal action was real enough, for he left Athens for good in 323, reportedly explaining that he was leaving, “lest the Athenians sin twice against Philosophy.”¹

A modern reader may well ask if such a story, like Aristotle’s *bon mot*, is too good to be true. Due scrutiny of the sources will follow, but it seemed to me that a reading of Aristotle’s poem that put this information aside as unreliable or irrelevant could hardly be called complete. Indeed, it seemed to me impossible even to construe the text without considering these matters, for they bear directly on our view of what the poem is trying to do. The story of the trial also raises questions about Greek literary culture in Aristotle’s time. Is it credible that an Athenian jury—which typically included hundreds of people selected at random—should have cared whether the song was a hymn or not? What was the prosecution thinking in launching such an attack, and how did they understand the text? We may also wonder about the relation between Aristotle the literary theorist and the wider public: How is it possible that he of all people could have opened himself up to a charge of misapplying generic rules? The Prince of Philosophers was, after all, also the Prince of Critics, and his lectures on *Poetics* had set out with exemplary clarity the system of literary genres on which most ancient and much modern literary criticism is based. He least of anyone should have erred in the question of what was a hymn and what wasn’t. Finally, if we doubt the story of the trial, ought we also to reject the poem as a later fabrication?

Such reflections led me to include in my literary analysis a wider view that took in the song’s contexts, including its early reception and transmission. Coming to terms with the words seemed to require understanding the circumstances under which

they were composed, presumably shortly after 341; and some idea of how such songs might circulate seemed necessary to understand how a personal lyric could have become a public scandal, as it seems to have in 323. In addition, once the question of the song's authenticity arises, we must give some thought to its later transmission, in particular asking about the circumstances under which a genuine song of Aristotle's might have been recorded and preserved. The result has been a rather extended piece of exegesis, but one that I hope is justified both by the intrinsic interest of the song and by the interpretative issues it raises; one of the pleasures in reading old poems is that the basic process of making sense of the words can provide heightened examples of the choices that arise in literary reading generally.

Aristotle's song for Hermias ought in fact to be recognized as a landmark in the history of Greek literature, because it is one of the very first lyric poems for which we have substantial evidence—in some cases going back to contemporaries—for how and where it was composed, performed, and received. We usually read early Greek poems knowing next to nothing about their authors and nothing about the people to whom they refer (except, of course, what the poems themselves tell us). But Aristotle's song comes down to us along with considerable information about its author, subject, and the responses of early audiences; we thus have an opportunity to supplement a reading we might give of it as an isolated, authorless fragment with one that can place it rather precisely within the political, religious, and musical cultures of the late classical age. Acknowledging that this agenda will draw me into areas beyond my expertise, and that literary theory has made the old tactic of putting texts in historical context a less than straightforward affair, I nonetheless hope that this attempt to see a lyric "in the round," as it were, may be a useful case study for the more frequent occasions when evidence is lacking to trace a poem's background in detail.

In my literary interpretations I have been guided by the first question that comes up when people hear that Aristotle wrote poetry: “Really? What’s it like?” I know of no other way to say what the song is like than to set it beside other poems in the tradition, both those that closely resemble it—Ariphron’s lyric in praise of health is the best-known example—and those that bring out its distinctive qualities by contrast. I end up comparing a far wider range of texts than earlier scholars have cited—from Sapphic stanzas through Sophoclean trimeters, taking in both “high” and “popular” verse and prose genres as well—but I submit each as illuminating specific aspects of Aristotle’s text while being worth a fresh look in its own right.

The book is organized to place Aristotle’s poem first, so that readers can come back to it repeatedly, as the text does. It is followed by my translation and a brief run-through of its contents, a first reading designed to register its principal themes and tropes as they would have unfolded before an ancient audience. I then turn to the evidence for Hermias and his relations with Aristotle and consider how it may affect our interpretation of the poem. Chapter 2 walks the story back to its sources very carefully, for the “historical” texts we use to understand a “literary” text are rarely straightforward and have contexts themselves to be considered. Chapter 3 takes up Aristotle’s only other poem to survive complete, an epigram he composed about Hermias’s death, which is reported to have been inscribed on a monument in Delphi. This and other related epigrams will make us confront the worrying gap that may arise between textual accounts of an event or object and the posited event or object itself. Despite these complexities, and despite some definitely spurious sources, I conclude in chapter 4 that we should accept Aristotle’s song for Hermias as authentic, even though attempts to specify a single original performative context remain speculative. At this point we will turn from the song’s contexts to the song, which I hold

is best approached by following Aristotle's accusers and asking: What is its genre? The first of the next two chapters sketches the traditional Greek system for recognizing forms of lyric (a topic that deserves more attention than it has received); the second argues for the flexibility and negotiability of a song's genre in actual practice. My interest in genre is not judicial—to determine the literary category to which the work properly "belongs"—but historical, looking at genres as epitomes of cultural norms and observing how they influence the meanings of songs and govern their circulation through society. Only if we appreciate the close connection between Greek conceptions of genre and the occasions of social life can we understand why Aristotle's accusers could have expected to arouse a jury's indignation at this alleged hymn. Chapter 7 begins a re-reading of the Hermias song, now seen against the panorama of Greek song types that constituted Aristotle's literary horizon. Here and in chapter 8 we will be in a position to see this poem and others like it in a new way. Even if the sources for the story turn out not to be trustworthy in all details, they can bring the text into focus by calling attention to aspects of it that provoked divergent and apparently heated interpretations. And even if some ancient readers seem to have misconstrued the text deliberately, this bizarre episode in the history of its interpretation is an important reminder that we cannot wish away our historical distance and see the work stripped of all partisan construal and temporal obfuscation. Indeed, we cannot draw a sharp line separating modern understandings of Aristotle's song from the chain of its ancient receptions, for the lyric has only reached us by being recorded again and again, each time under a particular conception of its meaning and value. That ongoing process of reception and interpretation is considered in the final chapter.

I should say here that I regard the perspectives I bring to bear as complementary without pretending that they combine

to reveal the poem's final and definitive meaning. It would be naïve to claim that putting a poem in its historical context is sufficient to determine its "correct" interpretation, however this be defined. Nor is my aim to understand the poem as an expression of Aristotle's psychology or to discover in it his personal response to events in his life. For me, the value of exploring the poem's history and the responses it drew from its audiences is that they enrich our perception of it as a specific cultural artifact, as a work of art produced in a unique time and place.² Historicizing also allows us to read the song's language against the language of the time and so to catch its "contemporary" accents, for all poems begin as contemporary poetry. The payoff for reading the lyric in light of its contexts is a more fine-tuned appreciation for its verbal dynamics. It will be seen that the song modulates through a variety of lyric styles and that it shifts the picture it gives of itself as it unfolds. For such reasons I will decline to pin it down in the end to a single historical context or a single genre; what seemed more important was to follow its changing meanings throughout its dynamic career, from the time it arose among the circle of Hermias's intimates until it passed, after a contentious entry into the public sphere, into antiquarian compilations such as that of Athenaeus, where we can read it today. What follows, then, is less an exhaustive historical analysis or final literary interpretation than notes toward a biography of a song.

A poem by "the master of those who know" can hardly be expected to have passed unnoticed among scholars of Greek literature, and my debts to earlier treatments of this poem ought to be acknowledged. It will be clear from my discussion that I have found especially useful Wilamowitz (1893), Bowra (1938), Jaeger (1948), and Renahan (1982), though I have not agreed with them on all points. What I have tried to add to these indispensable studies is a more constant awareness of

Aristotle's poem as a piece for performance, as a song (a μέλος or ᾠδὴ), which is what the Greeks would have called it. We have Aristotle's words because they were written down and then read, re-read, and re-copied; but their form shows that they were made as part of a song, a melodic work designed to be performed, re-performed, and remembered. (Accordingly, I use the term *poem* in what follows when considering Aristotle's lyric in its function as a written text, and *song* when thinking of it as a performance piece.) Keeping this fact in mind adds important dimensions to our understanding of the words that remain and of the meanings they took on through history. In sorting through the traditions about Aristotle, I have learned much from Düring's superb collection, in particular what value there is in "source criticism" properly done. This old approach was out of fashion when I was in school, in part because it could be seem naively positivistic to seek to track down the "sources" of great books. But the learning and intelligence displayed in such works as Wormell (1935) on the tradition about Hermias, Bollansée (2001) on Hermippus, and Harding (2006) on Didymus, along with, of course, the fundamental work of Wilamowitz and Jacoby, command respect; if we cannot aspire to recover all or even the key sources that lie behind a given work, such scholarship can be of great help in recognizing the ways in which texts and songs were used, passed around, and preserved in the ancient world.

Finally, I would not have ventured so far into fields of scholarship in which I was little more than a novice if I had not known I could rely on learned friends for help. Of those who read and commented on this book in manuscript, I thank first Douglas Lane Patey, my long-standing ideal reader on these matters. Nearby is M. B. E. Smith, whose bracing criticisms led me to omit many weak arguments and strengthen what I could not omit. My colleague Michael Attyah Flower lavished on me his deep and subtle knowledge of Greek history and

its sources. It was a pleasure to be able to impose on the kindness of Marco Fantuzzi, whose imaginative and learned criticism I have long admired. Vayos Liapis was similarly generous with his detailed knowledge and tactful sense of poetry, as was the versatile and thoughtful Marek Wecowski. Last but not least, Pauline LeVen's valuable suggestions were marked by the same originality and independence she displayed in the fine dissertation she wrote with me on fourth-century Greek lyric. My manuscript was supported at a crucial stage by Stefan Vranka of Oxford University Press; he secured helpful readers' reports and contributed many wise suggestions on repeated readings of the manuscript. Thanks to them all, my text has been purged of errors, inaccuracies, and infelicities of expression, while being enriched with references to primary and secondary literature. I thank them most warmly and avow with equal warmth that the defects that remain are mine alone.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- CA J. U. Powell, ed. *Collectanea Alexandrina*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925.
- CEG P. A. Hansen, ed. *Carmina epigraphica Graeca saeculorum vii-v a. Chr. n.* (Texte und Kommentare xii). Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1983.
- DK H. Diels and W. Kranz, eds. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, edition. 3 vols. Berlin: Weidmann, 1952.
- DL Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (*Vitae philosophorum*), ed. M. Marcovich and H. Gärtner. Stuttgart and Leipzig: Teubner, 1999.
- FGrH F. Jacoby, *Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*. Leiden: Brill, 1923–.
- Fr(r). fragment(s) in the edition specified
- IEG M. L. West, ed. *Iambi et elegi Graeci*, 2nd edition. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989–1992.
- LSJ H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones, *A Greek English Lexicon*. 9th ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–1940.
- PMG D. Page, ed. *Poetae melici Graeci*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

- PMGF M. Davies, ed. *Poetarum melicorum Graecorum fragmenta*, vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- RE A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, W. Kroll, eds. *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1893–.
- Rose V. Rose, ed. *Aristotelis qui ferebantur librorum fragmenta*, 3rd ed. Leipzig: Teubner, 1886.
- SH H. Lloyd-Jones and P. Parsons, eds. *Supplementum Hellenisticum*. Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1983.
- Test(t). testimonium (-ia) in the edition specified
- TrGF B. Snell, R. Kannicht, and S. Radt, eds. *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, 5 vols. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971–2004.
- Wehrli Fritz Wehrli, ed. *Die Schule des Aristoteles*, 2nd ed. 10 vols. and 2 suppl. Basel: Schwabe, 1967–1974.

Chapter 1

The Text

Aristotle: The Song for Hermias

ἀρετὰ πολύμοχθε γένει βροτείῳ,
θήραμα κάλλιστον βίῳ,
σᾶς πέρι, παρθένε, μορφᾶς
καὶ θανεῖν ζαλωτὸς ἐν Ἑλλάδι πότμος
καὶ πόνους τλῆναι μαλεροὺς ἀκάμαντας· 5
τοῖον ἐπὶ φρένα βάλλεις
καρπὸν ἰσαθάνατον χρυσοῦ τε κρείσσω
καὶ γονέων μαλακαυγήτοιό θ' ὕπνου.
σεῦ δ' ἔνεκεν «καὶ» ὁ δῖος
Ἡρακλῆς Λήδας τε κοῦροι 10
πόλλ' ἀνέτλασαν ἐν ἔργοις
σὺν [ἀγρεύ]οντες δύναμιν.
σοῖς τε πόθοις Ἀχιλεὺς Αἴ-
ας τ' Αἶδαο δόμους ἦλθον.
σᾶς δ' ἔνεκεν φιλίου μορφᾶς Ἀταρνέος 15
ἔντροφος ἀελίου χήρωσεν αὐγᾶς.

τοιγὰρ ἀοίδιμος ἔργοις,
 ἄθάνατόν τέ μιν αὐξήσουσι Μοῦσαι,
 Μναμοσύνας θύγατρες, Δι-
 ὃς ξενίου σέβας αὔξου-
 σαι φιλίας τε γέρας βεβαίου.

20

O Virtue of great toil for humankind,
 the fairest quarry in life,
 for your shape, maiden,
 even to die is an enviable fate in Greece
 and to endure pains, consuming, unrelenting;
 such is the fruit you cast into hearts,
 immortal-like, better than gold,
 than breeding, than sleep with its soft beams.

5

For your sake even that godly
 Heracles and the sons of Leda
 endured much in their exploits
 on the track [?] of your power;
 in longing for you Achilles and
 Ajax entered the house of Hades;
 for the sake of your dear shape, Atarneus'
 nursling left the rays of the sun bereft.

10
15

Hence he will be a subject of song on account of his exploits,
 and the Muses will grow him into immortality,
 those daughters of Memory,
 making grow reverence for Zeus,
 god of guest-friends, and the rewards of steadfast
 friendship.

20

Sources and First Reading

The Greek text above is taken from the standard modern edition of Greek lyric poetry by Denys Page (with one supplement at v. 12).¹ It is based on three ancient sources: the oldest is a commentary from the second half of the first century BCE on a speech attributed to Demosthenes; the commentary was composed by Didymus, an extremely productive and well-read scholar who worked in Alexandria.² In elucidating a speech (most probably the *Fourth Philippic*, 10.32) that alluded to Hermias, Didymus recalls certain points in his career and quotes Aristotle's song. The fullest account of the incidents surrounding the poem is given by Athenaeus, writing around the beginning of the third century CE. He quotes it near the end of his *Learned Banqueters* (Douglas Olsen's translation of *Deipnosophistai*), a long fictional account of an impossibly brilliant dinner conversation that Athenaeus composed by pillaging earlier works of antiquarian scholarship (Book 15, 696A-697B). Sometime later in the third century, Diogenes Laertius also quoted the poem in the account of Aristotle that he composed for his *Lives of the Philosophers*. These sources differ in small ways, and the question of what sources they used will be taken up in due course.

Page is responsible for the colometry of the text above, the ragged right- and left-hand margins meant to demarcate the musical phrases of the original; in the Didymus papyrus, the poem is written *en bloc*, as lyric poetry was often transcribed in the Hellenistic age.³ The patterning of short and long syllables shows that the song consists of a single stanza, composed in a fairly common kind of rhythm for which modern scholars have devised the term *dactylo-epitrite*. We do not know enough to say whether dactylo-epitrites were associated with a specific range of emotions or themes, but a leading expert in Greek metrics has noted that in the fourth century the rhythm was characteristic

of what he terms “educated bourgeois lyric.”⁴ As a performance piece, it should be conceptualized as a short, single-stanza song—dactylo-epitrites were always sung—with a melody unique to that song. It is dogma that goes back to the ancients that this meter implies that the song was for choral performance; the dialect suits this possibility, since it has the light Doric coloration that was conventional in choral odes. But I shall argue below that there is no reason the song could not have been performed or at least re-performed as a solo piece.

My rather literal translation follows the line numbers and punctuation of Page’s text, though for convenience I have inserted spaces in the translation to signal the song’s three main conceptual periods. As an introduction to the poem, let us follow Aristotle’s words and themes as they would have unfolded before an ancient audience, bearing in mind that Greek audiences were familiar with a vast body of songs, many known by heart, and were capable of delighting in new variations on old themes. This is to postpone a synoptic examination of the work’s structure, giving it a first hearing, so to speak, as an event that would have played out in time.⁵

No hearing occurs without expectations, and so the question of how the song sounded to an ancient audience raises for the first time the question of genre. Prima facie, Aristotle’s song begins very much like a hymn, which is to say that its formal components can be paralleled in innumerable Greek songs composed to praise a divinity.⁶ Hymnic style begins with the very first word, *areta*, a vocative that at once invokes and personifies “virtue.” (I take over, with some misgiving, this traditional translation of *areta* because it is less awkward than a more precise rendering would be, such as “human excellence,” which is the way the word is often rendered in Aristotle’s ethical treatises. What is crucial to bear in mind is that Greek “virtue” has not the moral or sexual connotations the word later acquired from its use in

Christian literature. In the context of a praise song, the best definition of *areta* may be that of Russell and Wilson, who base it on Aristotle's rhetorical and ethical works: *aretê* is "the power to provide and protect good things, and to confer great benefits.")⁷ In form, *areta* cues us to expect the Doric dialect (slightly different from the pronunciation *aretê* in Athens); that is, the following speech will not be everyday, unmarked talk. Songs with touches of Doric were characteristic of Greek cult hymns, though all we can infer from this formal detail is that the song presents itself as suitable to be sung by a choir and at a cult site, not that it was ever actually put to use in that way.

The hymnic rhetoric continues as the vocative is followed, as regularly in hymns, by an epithet: Aristotle calls upon not any form of Virtue but the one characterized by great struggling, literally "of many toils." He then gets down to the main business of the hymn, praise of the divinity, for as in many Greek hymns, the principle here is *do ut des*: the poet gives praise so that the god may be gracious in return.⁸ Aristotle fills the first sixteen verses with praise of *Areta* as the most desirable object of human aspiration. This praise is articulated into two parts, with the end of the first movement marked by a priamel in vv. 6–9, a figure of speech common in praise poetry that lists items in ranked order to set off the merits of the object of praise.⁹ Virtue is thus presented as more desirable than wealth or noble ancestry, more alluring than physical pleasure. Aristotle's version of this figure is made eminently apprehensible by being shaped as a tricolon crescendo in which the third element is given capping force by being expanded. (As in, "our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.") Here the word translated "with soft beams," a sesquipedalian and archaic-sounding epithet, rounds out the first conceptual period with sleep and at the same time brings the performer to a metrical pause in which to take a breath.

The second period (vv. 9–16) “proves” the claims of the first by adducing a series of admirable figures who spent their lives in the service of Virtue. These exemplary heroes are organized chronologically—Heracles and the Disokouroi did their deeds before the Trojan War in which Achilles and Ajax won glory—and metaphysically: Heracles is Zeus’s son, as were Castor and Pollux, the male offspring of his intercourse with Leda; of the Trojan pair, Achilles had the goddess Thetis for a mother, while Ajax was fully mortal. We are thus thinking in terms of time and noble ancestry when a third example comes up, which we may suspect will be the last, since the number three proved to mean closure in the priamel. In all respects the third item (v. 15) surprises: Aristotle names only one figure, and he leaps from heroes of old to a contemporary and friend, an abrupt move from *muthos* to *logos*, from more than mortal figures to the “nursling of Atarneus.”

Things conform a little less strictly to the hymnic program as our song begins its third period after v. 16. In the poem’s argument, Hermias’s devotion to *Areta* is the culminating proof of her worth and so belongs to the hymnic agenda of praise. At the same time—and here one begins to see an opening for Aristotle’s critics—Aristotle is also praising Hermias, implying that his travails, which are put on a par with the mythical exploits of heroes, make him worthy to be remembered like them. And so the third movement inaugurates a shift in focus, as what began sounding like a hymn to a divine principle modulates to sound like a song of praise directed at a fellow mortal. This shift in focus is arguably also a shift in genre, since in Aristotle’s day there was a long-standing and widely respected tradition that outstanding human achievement deserved to be celebrated in song, but that songs for mortals should keep their praise at a level below that which is offered to the gods. The distinction between hymns in praise of gods and songs for mortals was preserved in the popular terminology of Aristotle’s day, which called a song