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Dialects and literary genres in ancient Greece

Just as there was no political unity in ancient Greece, so there was no unified language: each area of the Hellenic world had its own dialect. Yet poetry was not just a local affair: it often had Panhellenic aspirations; that is, it was intended to appeal to audiences and readers throughout the Greek world. Through poetry, the Greeks were familiar with a variety of dialects and came to associate them with particular kinds of poems: for example, elegy was an Ionian genre, choral song was Doric, solo lyric Aeolic. The association between dialect and literary genre in part reflects the origins of particular types of poetry. For example, Sappho and Alcaeus composed their lyric poetry in Aeolic because Aeolic was spoken on their island of Lesbos. Then, through their poetry, Aeolic became a marker of a particular type of poetry, and even of a distinctive poetic mood. In some cases the association between dialect and genre was more complex: Homeric epic, for example, was composed in an artificial mixture of Ionic and Aeolic which was never spoken by a real-life community, but developed over a long period of time in Asia Minor and the adjacent islands. This poetic language established itself as the best means of expressing the epic deeds of gods and men, so that Hesiod, who lived in Boeotia, used it too in order to compose his epics. We thus see that the language of poetry was determined by genre rather than by the personal origins of poets and their audience: Tyrtaeus, who came from Sparta, used Ionian to compose elegy. This close association between dialect and literary genre may seem counterintuitive, but parallels from modern music immediately present themselves. English is the language of the blues, no matter who is singing and who is listening (though, of course, the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary may be affected by the actual origins of the singer and the standards of his/her audience). If we hear a blues sung in the Neapolitan dialect (or, conversely, a Neapolitan song sung in English) we immediately know that we are dealing with an experiment, a conscious cross-over. Similar issues are at stake when examining the relationship between dialect and genre in Greek literature. When the Athenian playwrights wrote choral odes, they added a number of 'Doric' alphas, yet their version of Doric differed from what Doric speakers used in real life. When Theocritus composed epic in a literary version of Doric, his cosmopolitan readers immediately knew that he was mixing genre and dialect in an unusual experiment.