Leonardo Cazzadori

# The Teaching Poet

## Knowledge and the Rhetoric of Hellenistic Didactic Poetry

*Themes and Forms in Graeco-Roman Literature 5*

**Mohr Siebeck**

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5

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Mohr Siebeck

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# 1. Introduction

"e Uraníe m'aiuti col suo coro
forti cose a pensar mettere in versi."
Dante, *Purgatorio* 29.41–42[1]

Hellenistic didactic poets rendered an impressive variety of learned topics into verse: astronomy, meteorology, pharmacology, geography, ethnography, philosophy, chronology and so forth. These poets, with their innovative literary achievements, may challenge readers' expectations about the realm of the poetic and the meaning of poetic form. A very specific task is commonly assigned to their poems: the instruction of the audience. How this *teaching* is formalised in the texts and what it means within certain cultural contexts has not yet been discussed systematically. This is the objective of this book.

Many scholars might agree that didactic poetry is a somewhat evanescent *genre* within ancient poetry. There has, however, been a tendency to work around this idea, positing a more stable, self-evident notion of a didactic genre. Alternatively, there are claims that it is not a genre, but a subgenre or a mode of writing in antiquity. These approaches fail to appreciate the reasons for this apparent lack of clarity within the idea of didactic poetry, nor do they consider whether this is something that can enlighten the meaning of the poems rather than cause confusion. The present study investigates how didactic poems teach readers about various scientific topics, i. e. how the texts are constructed in such a way that they appear to afford instruction. More importantly, I will qualify this instruction based on the types of prompts that are found in the texts. In other words, I am going to take the teaching of didactic poems seriously, but only in relation to what the poems themselves suggest – this is what I call the rhetoric of exposition in didactic poems.

Before I present the goals of this study in greater detail, I shall briefly introduce the issue of how ancient literary genres have generally been approached. I will then examine how Hellenistic didactic poetry has been treated as a genre. In the final section, I will provide an overview of the structure and the main goals of this book.

[1] Bellomo & Carrai (2019: 499).

## 1.1 Criticism of ancient genres

Genres are complex tools of literary criticism, with a very long history in modern analysis.[2] There are many possible ways in which genres can be constructed or deconstructed in modern scholarship. There are, however, two main macro-categories for any of these possible approaches. On the one hand, genres are understood as *classifications*. What this approach entails is that attention is given primarily to ancient authors who mention classifications of literary works, or – and this is sometimes complementary to ancient evidence – scholars themselves posit these, making distinctions based on formal aspects of the ancient texts.[3] This classificatory method relies either on the fact that certain ancient sources are deemed to have objective value in this matter, or on the importance of formal aspects, which are interpreted through the lenses of formalistic methodology (with the assumption that formal aspects are self-evident).

An example of this approach is the study of Francis Cairns (2007). Arguing that ancient rhetorical theory was one option for defining generic categories, he states the following about didactic texts: "All ancient didactic literature was probably thought to fall under the heading of symbouleutic. The function of the teacher in antiquity was regarded not as the conveyance of facts but the giving of precepts and therefore as a kind of advising" (Cairns 2007: 71). Cairns then mentions didactic poems (2007: 72). Therefore, he appears to have in mind didactic poetry, even though his expression 'didactic literature' is more general and might not rule out prose works. His classification is largely based on formal aspects (the presence of so-called precepts in these works) and is anchored on an ancient category of genre, the symbouleutic, which certain ancient authors and texts provide (for example, the third century rhetorician Menander, frequently mentioned by Cairns, but also ancient rhetorical theory more generally).[4] Cultural distance between Greek or Latin didactic poems and late antique rhetorical classifications is not addressed here, nor are examples provided of ancient readers who would have interpreted didactic poems as symbouleutic.

Gregory Hutchinson (2013b: 275–354) also proceeds with a classificatory method that gives prominence to formal aspects. In his system, metre becomes the key distinguishing factor within ancient poetry. He considers didactic poetry as a genre within the super-genre of hexameter poetry. The association between the two is corroborated as early as the testimony of Aristotle (*Poet.* 1447b) who, despite pushing against it, concedes that the hexameter was for many an umbrella term for poets and their works. Then, in defining genres within hexameter

[2] See Michler (2015) for a comprehensive intellectual history of genres in the modern period.

[3] For instance, see the influential study of Fowler (1982), who offers a typology of literary works, distinguishing between genres and modes of writing. On ancient classifications, see e. g. Lowe (2007), who analyses evidence of the epinician genre in antiquity.

[4] On Menander, see Cairns (2007: 34–69).

poetry (i. e. narrative, didactic, bucolic, occasional poems and satire), Hutchinson relies on various formal aspects. In the case of didactic, "the narrator directly speaks to an addressee, usually singular and masculine, and either urges him to do things or informs him about some aspect of the world which (in principle) is true through most human time and thus obtains at the present" (Hutchinson 2013b: 281). This definition depends on very general characteristics of didactic poems, without requiring an association with any specific period in antiquity and its socio-cultural ramifications.

Classificatory methods may lead to a certain dissatisfaction when consideration is given to ancient classifications of genre. In an article with the provocative title "Ancient literary genres: A mirage?" Thomas G. Rosenmeyer (1985) surveys some ancient generic definitions, mainly occurring in Plato and Aristotle, and concludes that these either varied greatly from one ancient critic to another or are often simplistic interpretations. Rosenmeyer then concludes that the ancients may not have based their production of literary works primarily on such ancient theories of genre. In his view, the ancients practiced model criticism instead, and relied on identification with a revered author rather than a generic idea.

In his article "Classical genre in theory and practice", Joseph Farrell (2003) focuses on certain gaps that ancient criticism of genres would appear to be subject to. With respect to Plato and Aristotle, Farrell (2003: 383) claims that "classical genre theory was a powerfully essentialising discourse", because the genre of a certain work was determined by the author's character, or by the metre used. However, he further argues that the practice of poetic genres was much more nuanced and dynamic than the ancient theories that were conceived about it. Examples of generic intersections, such as Pindar's element of blame poetry within his eulogies, comedy's para-tragic moments, Latin elegists who borrow from epic and so forth, lead Farrell to conclude that "the 'implied theory' instantiated in ancient poetry is far more sophisticated than the explicit theory developed by philosophers and literary critics and apparently espoused by the poets themselves in their manifestoes and programmatic declarations" (2003: 402).

Another approach sees ancient genres primarily as socio-cultural products, i. e. as products of social institutions within a particular culture.[5] This approach does not put the same emphasis on ideas of order and system as the formalistic-classificatory approach presented above. Although scholars sometimes refer to both approaches while writing about ancient genres, it is possible to differentiate between the two based upon the type of evidence used to support their argumentation. Formalistic-classificatory approaches tend to define ancient

[5] On the *social* dimension of genres, see the still very informative contributions by Voßkamp (1977), van Gorp & Mussarra-Schroeder (2000) and Michler (2015: esp. 19–86).

genres based on ideas and principles that allegedly remain valid throughout antiquity (e. g. ideas about metre, the function of the author or the text), not on specific historical contexts. The social approach, on the other hand, links generic characterisation with the social meaning of a certain work within historically defined contexts of production, performance, re-performance and reception.[6] This means that the issue is not the dichotomy between explicit and implicit theory, instead attention falls on how places and institutions of various kinds contribute to determining ideas about genre.

The social approach has become central in classical scholarship, thanks to research on ancient Greek poetry that is sung rather than recited, and the role of performance. Foster, Kurke and Weiss (2019), in the introduction of their collected volume, recall some tenets of this approach concerning archaic lyric poetry. First, ancient poems do not come to us directly from their original contexts of performance, but through long processes of reception, which add to the complexity of the poems' generic characterisation.[7] Second, as anticipated, genres, especially in contexts where orality and performance are key features, would not be exclusively defined by immanent formal features, but occasion also plays a central role.[8] Third, this study re-examines certain assumptions on the relationship between occasion and texts, and allows for a subtler understanding of ancient poems. It suggests that this relationship is not to be understood as one-directional in the sense that features of texts are always strictly determined merely by the occasion. Instead, texts have their own power beyond the occasion for which they were composed. Moreover, genres that emerge out of processes strictly dependent on social contexts need not be 'pure', but can share features of indeterminacy, complexity and blending that are traditionally associated with the context of reading rather than orality, like Hellenistic and Roman literary cultures.[9]

## 1.2 Approaches to Hellenistic didactic poetry

There has always been discussion about genres in analyses of Hellenistic literature. However, didactic poems do not appear to have always played a central role in scholarly debates about Hellenistic genres. I do not intend here to offer a detailed review of all the contributions on didactic poetry. What I am most concerned with in this section is a presentation of the available scholarly approaches regarding the question of genre in Hellenistic didactic poetry. Therefore, I will

[6] Seminal ideas of this approach are already in Conte (1991).

[7] Currie & Rutherford (2020) focus more specifically on canonization and reception concerning ancient genres of ancient lyric poetry.

[8] See Foster, Kurke & Weiss (2019: 3–6).

[9] See Foster, Kurke & Weiss (2019: 10–13).

provide an overview of methodological common features, and I will point out different ways to approach the issues of genre presented in earlier studies.

Scholars in the 1990s were keen to develop ideas about genre for the Hellenistic period and stressed the innovative and experimental generic features found in Hellenistic literary culture. Several influential studies dealt with the generic characterisation of literary works and the phenomenon of the so-called mixing of genres as originally posited by Wilhelm Kroll, such as Gutzwiller's study on Theocritus (1991) as well as the edited volumes by Harder, Regtuit and Wakker (1998) and Pretagostini (2000).[10] The book of Fantuzzi and Hunter (2004) is a useful starting point because it presents a clear synthesis of the most important results of research on Hellenistic poetry undertaken in the preceding decades. Most importantly, this study also discusses didactic poetry along with the other major aspects of Hellenistic poetry.

In reprising key ideas from various strands of scholarship about Hellenistic culture, the two scholars argue that, because Hellenistic poets were also literary scholars interested in editing and studying older works, they were in the best position to carefully disassemble and rearrange the rules of old literary genres to create new forms of poetry. In a context where traditional venues for performance were fading, an emerging elite reading culture made more room for experimentation and for textual fixation. Thus, the literary past of Greece, with its oral poetry, its various genres and occasions, was to be preserved and evoked now as a model in the written works of authors who sought fame in the new world of the Hellenistic courts and kingdoms.[11]

How does didactic poetry then fit into this account? Fantuzzi and Hunter (2004: 224–245) only discuss the didactic poet Aratus. It is noteworthy that they appraise Aratus' poem *Phaenomena* not as an eccentric work, but consider it central for the literary trends of the Hellenistic period: "In its striking combination of science and wit, creative engagement with tradition, and innovative experimentation with poetic voice, Aratus' poem is a primary witness to the responses of the period to the need to find new modes for poetic expression" (Fantuzzi & Hunter 2004: 224). Aratus would then pursue the same goal of combining innovation and tradition that other major authors of the third century B.C. shared. Fantuzzi and Hunter's interpretation of the poem suggests that Aratus employs the authority of Hesiod, borrowing stylistic and thematic aspects of a traditional type of poetry. He also rewrites his model by adapting features to the new literary culture, making the authorial voice more complex, introducing wordplays and, above all, producing exemplary accounts centred on a new topic (descriptive astronomy).

[10] On the concept of mixing or, 'crossing' of genres, and its (problematic) intellectual milieu, see Barchiesi (2001).

[11] See Fantuzzi & Hunter (2004: 1–41).

Fantuzzi and Hunter seem to be aware that the term 'didactic' poses challenges in appreciating the style and aesthetics of Hellenistic poetry.[12] They suggest that the point of Hellenistic didactic poetry is *not* the avoidance of a playful and selective approach concerning the knowledge conveyed, but, rather, to "give us examples, exemplary signs, to guide us as we move beyond the confines of the poem" (2004: 234). Fantuzzi and Hunter are not making a passing point. Their introductory section on Aratus (2004: 224–238) presents a considered reflection about the poet's goals, without giving way to hasty explanations of what it means to be a 'didactic' poet. One partial solution to the problem for the two scholars is to link Aratus' activity to the traditional notion of poetic σοφία, and of poetry as a repository of knowledge. Hence, they argue that "Aratus was not, nor pretended to be an expert astronomer; he was an expert, professional poet (a σοφός), and part of his expertise lay in acquiring knowledge, from whatever sources, and the exploitation of that knowledge in poetic modes" (Fantuzzi & Hunter 2004: 228).

Another important issue in the study of Hellenistic didactic poetry is how the so-called didactic tradition should be defined, and, above all, what authors and poems should be included within this tradition.[13] In recent decades, several studies posited a lengthy history for didactic poetry, which contained earlier Greek poems (Empedocles or even Hesiod) alongside Latin and Greek imperial poems. The Hellenistic poems would then be a bridge between these two different periods. An advantage of this approach is the considerable amount of textual evidence made available. Leaving aside those studies of the didactic tradition which investigate only Latin poems, two works stand out for comprehensiveness and impact.

The monograph of Bernd Effe (1977) analyses all ancient didactic poems of the Hellenistic and Roman periods and offers interpretations of their main generic characteristics. Such a wide scope affords useful generalisations on how the various poems set in motion the teaching in the text differently, and with diverging aesthetic outcomes. Hence, Effe makes the important and influential distinction between three main types of didactic, namely the transparent type as best represented by Aratus, the formal type (esp. Nicander) and the subject-related or 'sachbezogen' type (esp. Lucretius), i. e. poetry truly anchored in the object of teaching. Effe applies this scheme to the remaining didactic poems of antiquity which belong to one or more of the fundamental three types. The last chapter of this study deals with poems which Effe considers outliers of the genre and calls therefore 'Sonderformen'. These are late antique poems on grammatical and metrical topics (e. g. Terentianus Maurus), Archestratus' *Hedypatheia* and

[12] See Fantuzzi & Hunter (2004: 233): "What didactic poetry is and what claims it makes for itself are, however, areas in which misconceptions persist."

[13] Harder, MacDonald & Reinink (2007) analyse didactic poems across a wide range of cultures and periods.

Ovid's erotodidactic poems (*Ars amatoria*, *Remedia amoris* and *Medicamina faciei femineae*).

In offering a typology of didactic from the fourth century B.C. to late antiquity, Effe posits formal characteristics which must defy the particulars of changing cultural contexts to be so broadly applicable. Moreover, Effe (1977: 22) provides the following definition of ancient didactic: "Wenn im folgenden von 'Lehrdichtung' gesprochen wird, so bezieht sich dies auf eine ganz spezifische Form innerhalb des weiten Bereichs der lehrhaften Literatur der Antike: auf die Form literarischer Didaktik, für die heute die Bezeichnung 'Lehrgedicht' üblich geworden ist." This form of literary didactic is then traditionally explained as resulting from the poets' interest in versifying treatises on scientific or philosophical topics.[14]

There are two consequences of this approach. On the one hand, Effe does, in my view, offer valuable remarks on the poems' form. He carefully examines the poets' intentions in the texts and their stylistic choices and thus distinguishes between different didactic strategies in these literary works. There is, however, a possible pitfall in this interpretation of the texts: the 'teaching' of the poems has its value solely based on its proximity to one true model of poetic instruction: the one ideally represented by a coincidence of content and intention. Effe (1977: 30) states, the didactic poet "strebt nichts anderes an als eben die Vermittlung des sachlichen Wissens." Effe acknowledges the different possible (and productive) divergences from this ideal goal. He also tends to assume that such a divergence may occur because the topics chosen by the poets do not, either partly or entirely, reflect his true interests. Furthermore, in applying this approach to the Hellenistic texts, Effe considers Aratus and Nicander two different types of didactic. The former would aim to convey a deeper message, with the pretext of informing the reader about astronomy. The latter would convey banal information only to display his stylistic virtuosity. Such a marked differentiation in the authors' intention may be far-fetched. As the following chapters will show, Aratus and Nicander do share many features. In the Roman period, Cicero in *De oratore* associates them closely when he talks about this poetry, of which he is a learned and appreciative reader, as he himself composed didactic poetry.

The work of Peter Toohey (1996) brings a useful diachronic perspective to the study of didactic poems. The range of topics in this study is even broader than Effe's, as it also devotes chapters to earlier poetry, namely Hesiod and the Presocratic poems. Toohey emphasises some important features of the cultural and literary contexts of didactic poems throughout antiquity. Toohey recalls, for example, the importance of the shift from orality to written culture in Greece. He also mentions some general aspects of the Roman period, such as the context of the civil wars and Augustan culture, although he does not draw too many con-

[14] See Effe (1977: 23–26).

clusions regarding the genre of didactic poetry. In the final section of his work, Toohey makes some generalisations about the genre and argues that this type of poetry "bears a close though varying relationship to leisure and play" (1996: 240). This, once again, would spike in the Hellenistic period according to Toohey (1996: 242): "Nicander's and Aratus' poems exhibit the characteristics of my idealised leisure activity. Aratus and Nicander would have us derive pleasure from the literariness of their texts rather than just their (admittedly interesting) subject matter. These poems can, if we wish it, exist as ends in themselves."

Toohey's diachronic approach is useful; nevertheless, it fails to appreciate all the complexities of Hellenistic didactic poetics. As he presents didactic poetry mainly through a concept of didactic epic, he builds a coherent narrative of didactic poetry in its development from the time of Hesiod to the Hellenistic and Roman periods (despite the cultural changes mentioned already).[15] The playfulness and literariness of Hellenistic poems are rightly emphasised. But the didactic form of the poem is not examined in detail. For instance, Toohey (1996: 55) observes, in Aratus' case, that "the poem is resolutely technical and serious in its instruction" and that it combines variety and simplicity in its narrative. But what exactly this idea of seriousness or variety should mean for the poem's form remains to be clarified.

The work of Katharina Volk (2002) marks a pivotal moment in scholarship on didactic poetry, as it provides a detailed analysis of the didactic discourse that the poets set in their verses. Emphasising the peculiar self-referential qualities of didactic poems, Volk examines how the authorial voice of the poet-teacher is created and how the authors fashion the didactic scenario in the texts. Volk establishes four criteria that must all be met for didactic poetry to be separated from other genres. According to her definition, "a didactic poem could thus be described as the self-consciously poetic speech uttered by the persona, who combines the roles of poet and teacher, explicitly in order to instruct the frequently addressed student in professional art or branch of knowledge" (Volk 2002: 40).

Volk's definition works quite well for poems with frequent references to the domain of poetry or teaching and where the voice and identity of the author are made present throughout the texts. It is less effective in poems where these references are rare. Indeed, certain poems are excluded from the didactic genre for not adhering to some of the criteria posited in the introduction. Notably, Horace's *Ars poetica* is excluded on the basis that the authorial persona does not present himself particularly as a poet, but as someone merely able to teach poetic rules.[16]

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[15] See Toohey (1996: 1–19).
[16] See Volk (2002: 42).

The chapters on Lucretius and Ovid have much to say from the point of view of the communicative setting and the self-referential strategies of these poems (i. e. their poetics). Indeed, these authors provide many references to the poet-teacher. The chapters on Vergil and Manilius have important considerations about various stylistic or poetological aspects; however, they must also inevitably concede certain exemptions from the above-mentioned definition of didactic. For example, as Volk (2002: 198) notes, Manilius "does nothing to set himself up specifically as a teacher figure" and in acting in this way, might imitate Aratus' own choice to shy away from this role.[17] Vergil, moreover, would present all the features of the definition. Unlike Manilius, he makes his didactic intent clear with a variety of signal-posting expressions that (in Volk's view) are typical of the teacher figure.[18] However, in the *Georgics*, the persona of the poet-teacher "does not offer any explicit reflection on the relationship of didactic subject matter and poetic form. There is no equivalent of the honeyed-cup simile and no explanation of why instructions on ploughing are best presented in verse, or even why the speaker has undertaken to treat this particular topic" (Volk 2002: 125). The teaching of Vergil appears far less self-reflexive and present in the poem than one would expect from the definition of didactic. While Volk rightly says that we cannot expect all poets to manifest the same degree of self-reflection on the medium as, perhaps peculiarly, Lucretius does, Volk's definition may be deemed to rely too heavily on the idea of teaching.

Although Volk does not claim that Hellenistic poems elude her definition of didactic, I think that it is worth pointing out certain significant divergences. First, Volk suggests on several occasions that the required criterium of didactic self-consciousness means that the didactic poet must diffusely present his teaching speech as poetry.[19] She then concedes that Aratus and Nicander have a low degree of poetic self-consciousness and argues that this may be due to the poets' goal of playfully imitating scientific treatises in prose.[20] Second, Volk observes that Aratus lacks "references to the speaker's speaking" (2002: 56), i. e. the authorial persona does not foreground his own voice, unlike Nicander's poetry in which the author is considerably more vocal about his presence as narrator.[21] To conclude, two of her criteria, (i) explicit didactic intent and (ii) the teacher-student constellation, are easily applicable to Hellenistic didactic poems; nevertheless, I believe that the terms 'didactic', 'teacher' and 'student' require more stringent contextual and cultural qualification, as Chapters 2 and 3 of the present study will clarify. The other two interrelated criteria – (iii) poetic self-consciousness

[17] Volk underlines other aspects of the poem that in her view belong to the teaching experience, such as the presence of the student figure.

[18] See Volk (2002: 123).

[19] See Volk (2002: 39).

[20] See Volk (2002: 55–56).

[21] See Volk (2002: 56–57).

and (iv) poetic simultaneity (i. e. the poet's frequent reference to the process of his 'singing') – might prove less crucial for a definition of Hellenistic didactic poems. This does not mean that these poems are any less 'poetic' than the Latin ones, nor is it merely an issue of veiling the poetry. I believe that the point is to define the boundaries of Hellenistic didactic poetry anew and to start from the period's available evidence.

For this purpose, David Sider's article "Didactic poetry: The Hellenistic invention of a pre-existing genre" (2014) offers valuable help. Sider is not the first to argue that Hellenistic poets created a new didactic genre, with respect to earlier examples (Hesiod or Empedocles).[22] He does, however, very clearly note the innovative aspects of Hellenistic literary culture, without assuming that an interest in scientific knowledge mediated by the poems must be preposterous in this period (a point also made by Toohey). Furthermore, Sider, more firmly than earlier scholars, posits a gap within the history of the didactic genre prior to the Hellenistic period when he argues that "in the archaic and classical period, there was no clear-cut, or even rough-cut, sense of a didactic genre" (Sider 2014: 21).

Finally, further encouragement to work towards a stronger diachronic perspective may be found in various works which have commented on and interpreted didactic poets of the imperial period (first century A.D. onwards), with an importance granted to their cultural ramifications. I am thinking, for example, of the geographical poem by Dionysius Periegetes (Lightfoot 2014), Oppian's *Halieutica*, a poem on fishing (Kneebone 2020) and the astrological poetry of Pseudo-Manetho (Lightfoot 2020 and Lightfoot 2023). These studies contribute to qualifying generic, aesthetic and thematic features of post-Hellenistic literary culture, thereby showing aspects of continuity and – even more important for our purposes – discontinuity.

In Dionysius Periegetes' case, Jane Lightfoot shows that the poem owes a great deal to Hellenistic didactic poetry (especially to Aratus and Nicander), in respect to its length, intertextual play and its combination of variety and repetitive schemes.[23] On the other hand, she notices that, in contrast to Aratus and Nicander, "didacticism is now very explicit, and both participants in the 'didactic drama' are more prominent" (Lightfoot 2014: 102–103). This is an interesting point. It may again be wondered why 'didacticism' is not so present in Hellenistic poetry, yet it appears to play a role in Latin poems and in Dionysius. It may be asked whether the very idea of 'didactic' in the Hellenistic period would need to be reconfigured.[24] I also find it striking that Dionysius seems to regard the Homeric Catalogue of Ships in the *Iliad* as the most important model for the

[22] See Effe (1977: 24–25).

[23] See Lightfoot (2014: 85–102).

[24] Lightfoot herself, however, points out certain common features between Dionysius and Nicander, regarding the didactic drama (2014: 102–119). Dionysius' novelty appears to be his distance from the more influential (within the Hellenistic period) and less 'didactic' Aratus.

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